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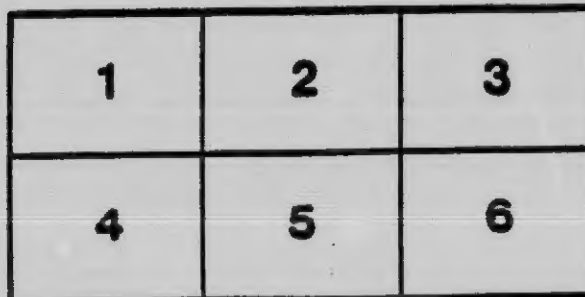
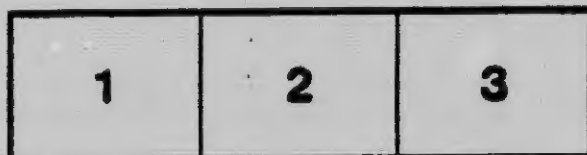
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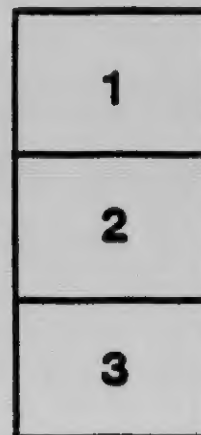
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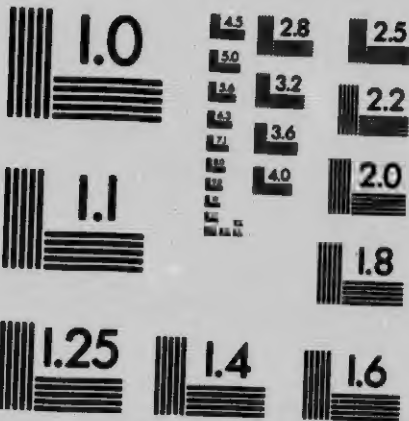
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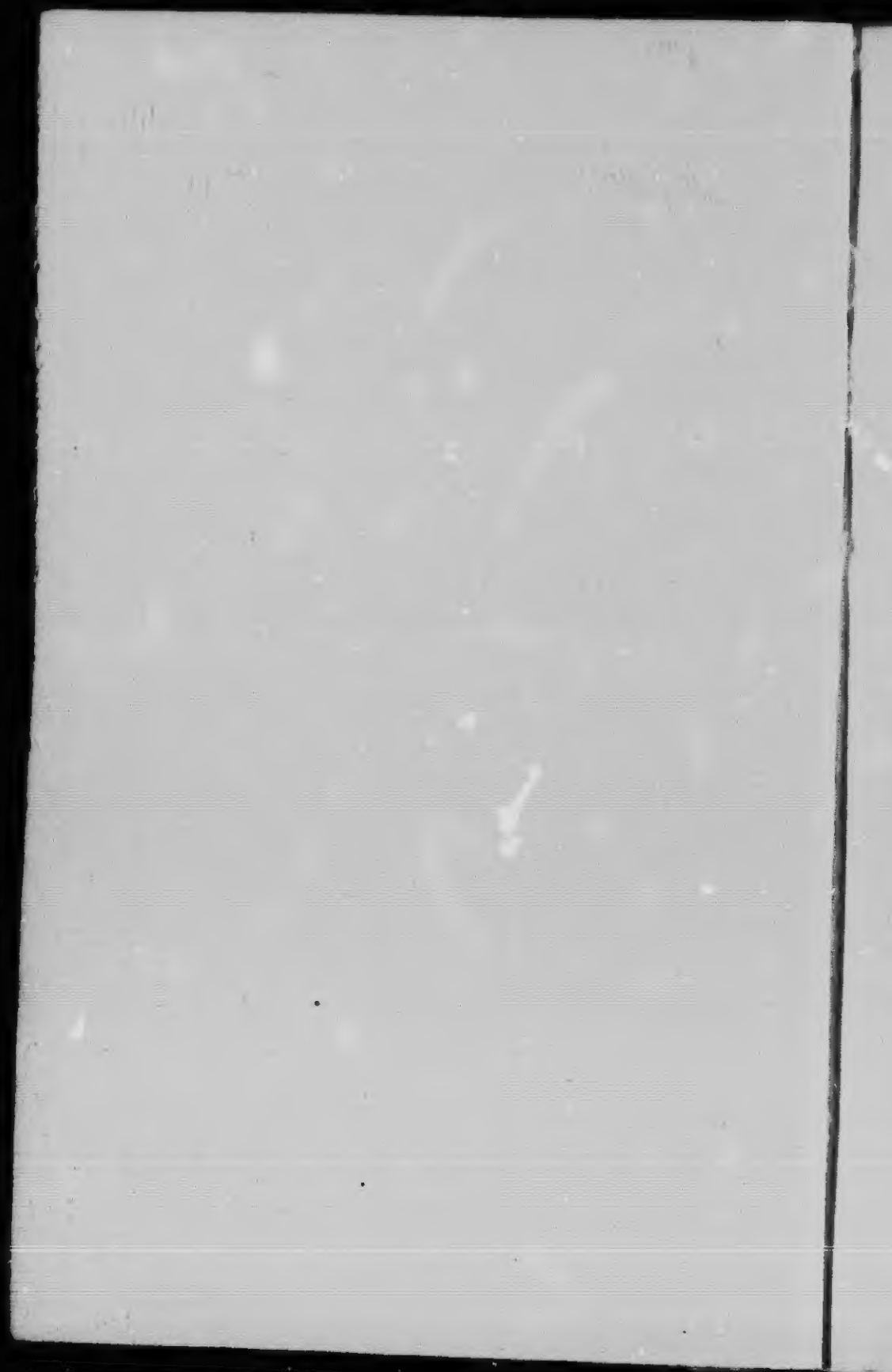


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# THE LAIRD OF CRAIG ATHOL

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# THE LAIRD OF CRAIG ATHOL

## CHAPTER I

"MR. FORBES, sir," said the servant, when he had thrown open the door of Sir Drummond Athol's study, at Craig Athol, Aberdeenshire.

Sir Drummond sprang from his easy chair with wonderful alertness considering his sixty years and his stiff leg—it had been the billet of an extremely antiquated but effective bullet at Tel-el-Kebir—to greet his visitor, who was a man of about his own age but of a very different physique, and wearing a very different costume. Sir Drummond Athol wore his "home" kilts—not the magnificent garb in which he was wont to attend state functions, but the sober kilt of the country gentleman made in rough tweed that challenged the worst weather in Scotland to do its worst, and such a challenge means a good deal. But Mr. Forbes, once Writer to the Signet at Aberdeen, but for a quarter of a century a solicitor of Lincoln's Inn Fields, wore the ordinary "lounge" suit of the sartorial advertisements, and it was so darkly grey in hue that it might easily pass for black. Mr. Forbes hoped that it did not look too sporting, and there is no record of his hopes in this direction failing to be realized. He so habitually wore black

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which could not by any stretch of imagination be called anything but black, that he shook his head when his tailor, taking his courage in both hands, one day cautiously suggested that when he was visiting his native land, which he did usually once a year, he might without offending the proprieties discard the sombre garments for something more cheerful.

"Gang awa', mon : would ye be rigging me oot like a buke-maker?" he cried—in moments of excitement in conversation with such a man as Donald Grant, the tailor, he invariably fell into his broadest Scots dialect, though as a rule he "had the English" with only enough of a Gaelic burr to inspire confidence in his clients, English as well as Scottish; for there is no shirking the fact that a Scottish accent inspires confidence, and confidence is the parent of the confidential in talk—the thing to encourage in a client. It was only after half-an-hour's argument that Donald Grant had persuaded him that many respectable people were in the habit of wearing grey, and that, by the exercise of a little caution in other directions, such as the avoidance of a white hat with a broad brim and a black band, most of them managed to escape having their abodes raided by the police on the off chance of its being used as a "place" within the meaning of the Act of Parliament; and so induced him to venture northward in the suit that he wore when entering the library at Craig Athol.

"My dear Forbes, a thousand thanks to you for coming; I am delighted to see you," cried Sir

Drummond, shaking him by the hand. "What sort of journey had you? How did you leave Mrs. Forbes and the children?—children? Well, I suppose we may still call them children. Let me see, Janie must be eighteen now."

"Janie's twenty and a bit, Sir Drummond," said Mr. Forbes, "and your Athol is two years over her. Doing well both, a little expensive, to be sure, but no extravagant, thank Heaven! Do ye mind the tale of the Arbroath mon, Sir Drummond, who was complaining to the meenister about the way the bairns were multiplying in his hoose? 'Ay, but ye shouldna be fashed for that,' said the meenister, 'for ye ken that the promise abides that bread will be provided for a' that come.' 'Ay,' returned the other, 'bread; but what about the claes, meenister?' That's what I feel—'tis the clothes that run away with the siller, specially when the bairn is a lassie. But I have no reason to complain, Sir Drummond—no reason at all. And her Ladyship and Miss Meg, they're both in guid health, I hope?"

"Could not possibly be better, Forbes," said Sir Drummond. "Whatever may come to trouble me I do my best to spare them."

"That's why 'twas decreed by Providence that a man should be the head of the house, Sir Drummond: to shelter the weaker members from all that may mishap."

"I hope that it is as orthodox to think that why it is decreed that family solicitors should exist is to give them a chance of having the troubles of their clients poured into their ears."

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"I wouldna go so far as to say, without consulting the best authorities, Sir Drummond, that Providence has made any special decree *re* family solicitors; but I will allow without a moment's hesitation that they do as a rule hae a deal o' trouble poured into their lugs—ay, at a certain fee that they may or may not consider remunerative; and that's a great consolation to them, though I'm not so sure about their clients."

"But I am—at least I can give you an assurance from one of the clients that he has derived more comfort from pouring his troubles into the ear of his solicitor than from any other source. That's why you are here to-day, Forbes."

"I'm proud, Sir Drummond—I say, I'm proud. What signifies a night journey from London? I tell you, I'm proud to be a servant of your family, Sir Drummond. Unto the third and fourth generations—that's not the limit o' the endurance of Scots gratitude, and not two generations have gone by since Adam Forbes was taken from his croft by a Drummond Athol, and made a man of. I'm here to hearken to your trouble, and to lighten it if so be that I can."

Sir Drummond gave him his hand and pressed his warmly.

"You are best adviser—the best friend—that ever man had," he said in a low earnest tone. "If it had not been for you——"

"You would have been more cautious, eh, Sir Drummond? Is that what's in your thought?" said the solicitor.



"Not at all," cried Sir Drummond. "I am sure that there was no lack of caution on our part. Don't you remember that when I wanted to enter into possession of the property twelve years ago, you shook your head and said that it would never do to be so precipitate—that the formalities of advertising for the missing heir in various out-of-the-way places should be gone through for at least three years—I thought that one year would be quite sufficient?"

"Ay, I thought it best to be on the safe side. But for a" the guid that came of our trouble and expense I might have let you have the satisfaction of your inheritance a couple of years sooner."

"Of my inheritance?"

"What, your old misgivings are returning to you? Now, look you here, Sir Drummond; let us take a retrospect of the whole matter: 'twill refresh our minds. What's the guid of trying to speer into the future? The nice bit of property known as the Craig Athol estate was left to you by your cousin, Kenneth Athol, in default of a nearer of kin to the testator appearing to claim it. Now, it has been made abundantly clear that there's no nearer of kin in existence, therefore——"

"Ah, that's just the point: is there no nearer of kin in existence?"

"The Courts decreed in your favour, and I'm on the side of the Courts—when they give a reasonable judgment—that is, a judgment in favour of my client."

"Don't forget that the judgment was only pro-

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visional, Forbes. Don't forget that it was only decided that I was entitled to enter upon the enjoyment of the property, provided that the nearer of kin failed to put in an appearance and substantiate his claim."

"I don't forget that point, Sir Drummond, and I mind too that we did all that mortal men could do to make discovery of the same Douglas Athol sole son and heir of the said Kenneth Athol, who was turned out of doors by his curmudgeon of a father—excuse me describing your cousin with scrupulous accuracy, Sir Drummond—nineteen years ago."

"I don't suppose that there are many people who would be inclined to question the accuracy of your description of old Kenneth Athol—at any rate, I will not be the one to contest this point. Every one knows that the man was pig-headed—unreasonable, a tyrant, without natural feelings, without remorse——"

"I'm no so sure about the remorse. I'm of the impression that the last will and testament of him showed a touch of remorse; he left the whole of his property to his son in the first instance, it only came to you in default of his son's turning up to claim it."

"It was a death-bed repentance then; for what attempt did he ever make in his life-time to find out whether his son was alive or dead?"

"None, so far as we know. That was part and parcel of his character. He would never make a move that might so much as suggest that he was in the wrong. Man, he was as proud as Lucifer,

ay, and as vindictive—up to the last—the very last. Was there any one who blamed his son for leaving the house where his life had been made a hell to him? Every word that he spoke—every act of his life—every ambition that it is natural for a young fellow of spirit to have was wrong in his father's eyes—ay, sir, and he was not content, mind you, with merely objecting; whatever he objected to he ground into the earth under his feet."

Mr. Forbes had so far forgotten himself in his denunciation of the late Kenneth Athol, as to rise from his chair and stalk about the room, clenching his right hand and bringing it down upon his left palm with a very convincing thud. Sir Drummond watched him, and made more than one motion of acquiescence in his views on the subject of his late kinsman.

At last Mr. Forbes stayed his stamping feet in the middle of the room. He cast his eyes round the walls. They were covered with pictures let into the old oak panels.

"Where's his picture?" he asked. "There used to be a portrait of Kenneth Athol in this room. It was painted by George Graeme of the Scottish Academy, but he only got paid one fourth of the price which Kenneth Athol bargained to pay him."

"It used to hang here, but when George Graeme published in his memoirs the whole story of the transaction, I thought it well to have it removed," said Sir Drummond. "Hang it all, Forbes, I could not stand seeing people who visited the house, keep their eyes fixed upon it with a smile upon their

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faces that said, 'So that is the picture that Kenneth Athol swindled Graeme over.'"

"You did well," said Mr. Forbes. "I only asked to see it that I might point out to you how well the limner understood the nature of the man that he depicted. He made the finest picture of a curmudgeon that was done since Hogarth painted Lord Lovat checking off on his fingers the men he hoped to get hanged drawn and quartered for their part in the '45. What I haven't understood to this day is how a man that could read character like Graeme could be fule enough to paint a portrait of Kenneth Athol without securing beforchand a stamped covenant to receive so much for the work. Kenneth Athol never would be the fule to resist such a document—ay, when he had made sure that there was no flaw in it."

"Poor man! poor man!" said Sir Drummond thoughtfully.

"You're thinking of the son now," said Mr. Forbes.

"I was thinking both of the father and his son," replied Sir Drummond. "They were both to be pitied. The father dying alone more than ten years after he had driven his son from home, and the son——"

He stopped abruptly and looked at his guest. There was a long pause before Mr. Forbes said abruptly in a low voice—

"Ay, ay; the son—what of the son?"

Sir Drummond leant toward him, saying in the same tone—

"That's just the point—what of the son?"

The solicitor laughed quite heartily—for him.

"And this is your trouble just now, my guid frien'?" he said. "This is why you wrote to me to come to you in hot haste? I might have known. You are uneasy in your mind about Douglas Athol. You'll pardon me for saying that you're very foolish in this particular matter, Sir Drummond. If the Courts were satisfied that Douglas Athol was dead why cannot you be? Why should you be uneasy? My word, I do believe you'd be glad if the chap was to turn up in the flesh."

"I'm not sure that you're greatly in error on this point," said Sir Drummond. "If it were not for my daughter Meg——"

"Hoot, Sir Drummond, you are getting sentimental, and that, let me tell you, is next door to becoming incapable of managing your own affairs—not that I allow that any man is capable of managing his own affairs. But you never sent to me to come to you only for the sake of hearing me say to you once again what I've said to you lang syne?"

"You're right, Forbes. I wrote to you to tell you that Douglas Athol is alive to-day."

Once more Sir Drummond had bent forward in his chair, and spoken his words in a mysterious whisper; and when he had spoken them, he remained with his eyes fixed on the other's face.

But the face of Mr. Forbes, solicitor of Lincoln's Inn Fields, did not undergo any special change at that moment. He had learnt to control his features



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so thoroughly that the most extraordinary news failed to cause him to move so much as an eyelid. He returned Sir Drummond's gaze with an absolutely blank look. Sir Drummond might have been looking at the impassive marble bust of Plato which stood on a pedestal above the head of Mr. Forbes.

For some minutes there was silence in the room, but at last Mr. Forbes nodded twice, and then said—

"Do you tell me that? Douglas Athol alive? Weel, weel!"

## CHAPTER II

THERE was another long pause in the room before Mr. Forbes put the tips of his fingers together, and remarked with a little half sigh—

"You've evidence to this effect, I doubt not, Sir Drummond?"

Sir Drummond did not make an immediate reply. He rose from his chair and crossed the room to a window; it seemed as if some one had beckoned to him from outside, and he had gone to investigate the incident. But when he reached the window he did not look straight out; he sent his eyes up to the mountain that towered above the castle, and stood gazing up to the peak of Cairn Tual in a listless way. Mr. Forbes knew that if the mountain were suddenly to become an active volcano Sir Drummond would have remained in ignorance of the fact. He was looking at the mountain without seeing it.

"H'm, he is thinking how he can best break the news to me," was what was in Mr. Forbes' mind at the moment. But he said nothing: he knew that nothing would be gained and a good deal might be lost by hurrying the other in the communication which he had to make. They were both Scotsmen, accustomed to deliberate thought

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preceding deliberate action. That is how it comes that the most important battles in the history of England have been won by Scotsmen.

At last Sir Drummond Athol left the window, and returned to his chair.

"Forbes," he said, "I wonder if you are a believer in second sight."

"I wonder," replied Forbes without emotion.

"For myself," resumed Sir Drummond, "I used to laugh at the notion of second sight when I was a young man, but, by heavens, I haven't been in the habit of laughing much at it since I got sense. There's a good deal in it, my friend."

"Ay, nae doot. nae doot. I'm thinking what a pity 'tis that all the evidence you could muster on the subject would pass for nothing in a Court of Law," remarked Mr. Forbes.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Forbes, than will be admitted as evidence in a Court of Law," said Sir Drummond. "Have you heard us talk of Andrew Macfee?"

"I believe I've heard tell o' the man. A crofter, eh?"

"He is a crofter. An excellent fellow—religious, a good son, a good husband and father. He is not the sort of man that would be inclined to the tricks of a charlatan. Beyond a doubt he is gifted with that mystery of second sight, which now and again makes itself manifest in the Highlands."

"Ay, Sir Drummond, ay," was the non-committal remark of the solicitor on receiving this information.

"Mind you, I don't suggest anything as to what

this second sight is," said Sir Drummond; "some people think it is akin to witchcraft, and I have no doubt that in the good old days many of the gifted folk suffered grievously at the hands of their zealous but more commonplace brethren; but now I trust that we who have had something of a scientific education are more reasonable."

The solicitor pursed out his lips, and gave his head the least perceptible shake.

"What do you say?" cried Sir Drummond.

"I? Not a word—not a word," said Mr. Forbes.

"Well, what were you thinking?" cried Sir Drummond, but not petulantly; he only seemed anxious to account for the way his visitor had pursed out his lips.

"Thinking? Oh, that's another matter," said Mr. Forbes with a smile. "It's generally supposed that a man's thoughts are his own. But I'm not one to insist on any hard and fast rule in the matter of thoughts. I'm free to confess to you, Sir Drummond, that what was in my mind when you spoke had relation first to our Highland second sight; secondly, to our scientific education; and thirdly and lastly, as the guid meenister used to say, to the evidence before a legal tribunal. Never mind: continue your story. You were saying that a scientific education made a man more reasonable."

"I meant what I said. I have heard people scoff at our stories of second sight."

"And so have I, Sir Drummond; but they were

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all Southrons—ay, or Glasgow bodies—business bodies; mind I don't say busy bodies, though Glasgow is full of the like."

"You believe in second sight, Forbes?"

"Sir Drummond, my answer to you is that I am Highland born, and that a residence of thirty years, more or less, among dour and commonplace Saxons is not enough to alter this fact. I hae never changed my nationality and the sentiments that surround it, though my friens tell me that I hae lost a' trace o' the brave Doric o' my native land."

"Don't you believe them; they slandered you, man. They have said the same of me these forty years. Well, your confession about second sight saves me a deal of trouble and, I doubt not, a good few words, to say nothing of argument."

"Framed in a purely scientific spirit, Sir Drummond?"

Sir Drummond laughed.

"I was a fool to think that it would be necessary to lay the case for second sight strongly before you. I might have known that you were—what you are," he said.

"I am all that; and in addition, mind you, I am by profession a solicitor, with a middling full knowledge o' what is reckoned legitimate evidence in a Court of Law. Now, after all these preliminaries, would you not be doing well to tell me all that you have to tell about Andrew Macfee and his speerin' into the future—or maybe 'tis into the past he has been speerin'? But first and foremost,



you didna give him any money, Sir Drummond? A Highland man with a reputation for second sight can as a rule see a deal clearer when his een hae been wipit with the crisp edge o' a bank-note."

Mr. Forbes once again lapsed into broad Scottish; the greater part of his conversation had been, as it usually was in the land of the Southron, free, with the exception of a word or two, in which he somewhat lengthened the vowel e, from anything broad in the way of pronunciation. As a matter of fact, if one were to write down phonetically the divergences from strict accuracy in the conversation of an ordinary educated Englishman, one would find it necessary to alter far more words than would be required to convey some idea of the pronunciation of a Scot. Mr. Forbes spoke English as a rule more correctly than an Englishman in the same position of life; but, as has been mentioned, when he became excited, or even greatly interested, he found the idioms and the accents of his native land very convenient auxiliaries.

He had talked of throwing away money—of using a crisp bank-note in a way that threatened to destroy its utility as a medium of exchange. It was no wonder that he became excited.

Sir Drummond laughed.

"Scotsman to the back-bone—nay, to the fingertips!" he cried. "Dinna forget, mon, that I'm a brither Scot," he added, speaking the Doric as purely as his guest had done. "Nay, ma frien', I didna gie the chiel a bawbee."

"Ay, and mayhap you'll acquaint me the noo

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with something o' what he told you in his second sight."

"I think that I can do much better, Forbes."

"How's that?"

"I can make him speak for himself."

He touched the button of the electric bell, and when the footman appeared in response to its summons, he said—

"Andrew Macfee is in the housekeeper's room; if he has quite finished his snack, ask him to come here," and when the servant had gone, Sir Drummond turned once more to his visitor.

"I dropped in by chance to Andrew's cottage on the mountain a week ago," he said, "and quite accidentally I learned from him that he had been dreaming—I suppose we had better call it dreaming——"

"In the mean time, Sir Drummond—ay, dreaming—that's without preejudice."

"Well, he had been dreaming about Douglas Athol."

"He had been acquaint with him in the old days?"

"Yes; Douglas when a lad had been in the habit of running off to the crofter's cottage when his father had been unusually brutal to him. He had stayed there for days at a time. The man had never shown himself to be afraid of the father's wrath being roused against him for harbouring the boy, though more than once the old man had threatened him with the direst penalties for doing so. Here he comes."

The footman opened the door, and Andrew Macfee entered the room, and gave a hitch to his plaid while he nodded to Sir Drummond. He eyed Mr. Forbes for some moments, and then said—  
 "This is no Mr. Forbes."

He spoke in that straightforward way which is part of the nature of a man who has lived all his life among mountains. The Swiss and the Scots have that characteristic in common. Their directness savours of abruptness and, to the ignorant, of rudeness. Dwellers in the fastnesses of the mountains do not speak as if they were mortally afraid of giving offence to all who hear them. This Andrew Macfee was a good specimen of his sturdy race. He was tall and lean almost to a point of gauntness. He had a slight stoop—the stoop of the shepherd, and his iron-grey hair was tossed all over his head. He had abundance of it both on his head and on his face. His beard showed signs of having been clipped, but it was still long enough to cover his throat with its coarse tangle. He had a strong mouth, and it closed with a snap when he had spoken his few words. It was, however, his eyes that were the most noticeable of his features. They were large and singularly hollow, suggesting not so much mystery as melancholy. Such were the eyes that the old Italian painters gave to St. John the Baptist, to Elijah the Tishbite, to Isaiah the prophet, to the mourning Jeremiah. Mr. Forbes looked at the man now and wondered how it was that he had at one time regarded him as an ordinary Highland crofter.

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"That's no Mr. Forbes," said Andrew Macfee.

"I thought you had a better memory nor that, frien' Andrew," said Mr. Forbes, holding out his hand which the other took without any particular show of cordiality. But Mr. Forbes was not one of those people who think the North Briton cold-hearted because he is not demonstrative. He was amused when people called him to his face a cold-blooded Scot. He knew that Andrew spoke from his heart when he said—

"I'm main glad to see you this day, Mr. Forbes."

"And 'tis glad I am to find you still in the land o' the living, Andrew," replied Mr. Forbes.

"'Tis wearin' well that you are indeed, sir," said the crofter, looking critically at Mr. Forbes out of those deep eyes of his. "You are not a young man, Mr. Forbes, any more than mysel'; but you are far from being an old man. Do you mind the day we cookit the salmon owre the whin fire and drank the usquebagh to wash it down, Mr. Forbes?"

"Ay, mon, how could I forget it?" said Mr. Forbes. "I've never had a chance o' poaching a fish sin' then, and maybe that's why I don't think that I've ever tasted salmon sin' we singed the skin of yon one, Andrew lad."

"Ay, 'tis nearer forty nor thirty years syne," remarked Andrew, with no show of enthusiasm. But Mr. Forbes knew that the recollection of the incident had stirred the man deeply. Mr. Forbes had some private feelings of his own to reckon with.

Then followed some more recollections of bygone years before Mr. Forbes had migrated southward, when he had made many an excursion into the region round about Craig Athol and the mountains that look down upon the old castle. Andrew Macfee had been his companion in more than one of these adventures, when the pen of the writer's office was exchanged for the salmon rod, and the foolscap folios for the book of flies, which Andrew kept adding to weekly for the benefit of his friends.

Sir Drummond was able to add his voice to those of his visitors, for he too had been an occasional visitor to the North, long before he had any expectation of inheriting the estates of Craig Athol, then in possession of his unpopular cousin, Kenneth Athol. It seemed as if the object of Andrew's present visit to the Castle had been forgotten by himself as well as by the others, for they kept chatting away about the mountains and the rivers and the lakes and their inhabitants, as though they had arranged this meeting for the consideration of such subjects alone. It was the casual introduction of the name of Douglas Athol that gave Sir Drummond a chance of saying—

"Oh, by the way, Andrew, I wish you would just tell Mr. Forbes before you leave something of what you mentioned to me some time ago about Douglas Athol."

The old crofter bent his head towards the grave. His lower lip pushed itself out to a considerable degree, he cast down his eyes whilst he said—

"Och, indeed, I canna hae you place owre  
C 2

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dependence on anything that I said about that puir chiel, Sir Drummond."

"You may be sure that I will not be so weak, my good man; I just take all that you say for what's it worth," said Sir Drummond. "And I think that I can promise you that Mr. Forbes here is not any more likely than myself to attach too much importance to the hints that you have given me through the exercise of that gift of yours, Andrew."

"I sometimes wish that the geest had fallen to the lot o' some other body more worthy than mysel'," said the crofter. "'Tis a great responsibility indeed, I sometimes think; and I ask mysel' if it comes from on high or below. I awake oft in a cold sweat o' nichts when the thought takes hold o' me that the second sight may be a gift like unto the talents in the parable, and if I fail to use it properly I may be reckoned an unprofitable servant. That was why I cam' to you, Sir Drummond, to tell you that I had looked across Glenbrae one early dawn and in place o' seeing the sheep going down to the burn, I saw plainly Douglas Athol walking down a quayside in a strange town o' dirty white houses with palm trees, just like the Bible pictures o' the Holy City o' Jerusalem, and blacks with robes o' white stuff about them—and then there was a quayside and ships, and he said, 'Andrew, I'm coming hame to see you and the old hame once again.' That's all, Mr. Forbes; and 'tis not much that it is, after all, you will say; but it was the thocht o' the unprofitable servant that

forced me to see Sir Drummond and tell it to him, though it happened three months ago."

"But you've seen Douglas Athol more than once since then," said the sagacious solicitor.

"Ay, sir, that's the truth, though I don't know how you've come to hear it, for I named it to nae mon alive," said the crofter.

"I've something o' the gift o' second sight myself," said Mr. Forbes shrewdly. "You've seen a good deal more than you've told us, and I'd like to hear all, however loth you may be to tell it all. Now, Andrew, ma frien', take a step to yon window, and look out owre the burn there, where the water gives a twinkle or two among the branches, and maybe you'll be able to tell us a bit mair. If I mistake not running water is something of a help to your eyes when you're in the way of exercising your gift."

"It doesna come at all times when I weesh for it," said Andrew. "Lord knows I don't wish for't at a'. It just comes—I see what's before my eyes and that's a'. But gin you like it, sir, I'll een look oot o' the window. Ay, I do believe that the running o' water in a burn clears my sight—maybe there's nothing in it."

He went to the window and stood looking out. It was an inspiring picture that lay before his eyes, though of a sort that was familiar enough to him. The mountains curved boldly upward in magnificent sweeps of purple heather from where the thick plantation of firs that sheltered the Castle came to an end; but immediately under the window there

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was a long grassy terrace and a sloping garden with great beds of fuchsias beyond which the trout stream sparkled on its way, winding about between the fir trees on its banks.

Sir Drummond did not interfere with the suggestion made by Mr. Forbes that Andrew Macfee should set about a deliberate exercise of his powers of second sight; it was too like testing a professional thought reader for his fancy. But he said nothing, as the crofter did not object. He retired with Mr. Forbes to the further part of the large room and lit a cigar.

Before it was well alight Andrew had turned away from the window.

"I'll bid you guid mornin', S. Drummond, and you too, Mr. Forbes," he said quietly, picking up his cap from the floor where he had thrown it. He was plainly hurt at the commonplace way he had been treated by the man of business. Sir Drummond sympathized with him. The idea of reducing the weird and mysterious power of the man to a business level was obnoxious to him.

"Yes, I think you had better go home, Andrew," he said. "I fear that our friend, Mr. Forbes, has lived too long away from the Highlands to understand the nature of your gift. I'm much obliged to you for coming here and telling us all that—that——"

He stopped suddenly, for Mr. Forbes had caught him by the arm. Andrew had taken a few steps from the window, but all at once he had turned his head quickly, as though he heard the voice of some



one speaking to him from outside. His cap dropped to the floor. He stared out vacantly through the vacant panes.

"Heevens maircy!" he muttered once, and then became silent. He remained staring at the window for several minutes, but both the men who were beside him in the room saw that his eyes were fixed, not upon any object on the terrace—not at anything that was to be seen on the mountain, but on something beyond—something indefinitely distant. Once he started, and once he raised his right hand threateningly. Then he gave a long sigh, passed his hand quickly across his eyes, and looked round with the eyes of one who is just awake, first at Mr. Forbes, afterwards at Sir Drummond Athol.

He seemed dazed—alarmed.

"Sir Drummond," he said in a whisper, "I have had a warning, but Douglas Athol has nothing to do wi' it. 'Tis your daughter, Miss Meg—she is in danger—mortal danger, sir; for God's sake watch her—don't let her oot o' your sight if you value her life—deadly peril—deadly peril is before her—she is on the brink of a precipice—for the Lord's sake hold her back—hold her back!"

He was trembling in every limb; but he managed to stagger to the door, to pull it open and rush out before the others had even begun to recover from their surprise.

### CHAPTER III

SIR DRUMMOND ATHOL and Mr. Forbes stood a few feet apart, with their eyes fixed upon the door through which Andrew Macfee had gone. Then instinctively they turned to the window; not until some minutes had passed did each look into the face of the other. Forbes saw that Sir Drummond's was very white.

They both drew a long breath. Mr. Forbes laid his hand on the back of the nearest chair and sat down. But the other man remained on his feet. He glanced at the door and the window alternately. It seemed as if he was expecting Andrew to return.

"I don't believe that his intention is to return, Sir Drummond," said Mr. Forbes after the lapse of some minutes. "This is not just what we bargained for. What is the meaning of it, anyway?"

"Heaven only knows," said Sir Drummond. "The thing is uncanny. What did the man see? There's no doubt that he saw something; only a fool would fancy for a moment that he was trifling with us."

"Oh, ay; there's nothing of a charlatan about Andrew Macfee; but if he's sincere that does not prevent his being unsatisfactory."

"You expected to receive some further informa-

tion regarding Douglas Athol," said Sir Drummond.

"Well, I allow that I thought it just possible——"

"That's what makes the whole thing so startling. All our expectations were directed toward Douglas Athol, and it was of him that the man came here to speak, and yet, in a moment—but he was sincere beyond a doubt."

"True—true! It takes a body's breath away, especially if one has been living for over a quarter of a century among Southrons, and paying scrupulous attention to the Law Courts. Where might Miss Meg be just now, Sir Drummond?"

"She is on a visit to Mrs. Egremont in Yorkshire, but she intends coming north for our usual party by the end of the week. I think I should do well to go to her, and bring her home myself. What do you say, Forbes?"

"I don't see where the need is, Sir Drummond. But that's a matter entirely for yourself to consider. I wouldn't take it upon me to advise you one way or another. Do you consider the warning which has just been given to you respecting her, too solemn to be neglected?"

Sir Drummond took a turn or two up and down the room and then stopped, opposite the window, for a moment before replying.

"There was a man in the Gordons in my fighting days who had the same power," said he musingly. "Y's, his name was Macgregor. He was wise enough to keep his own counsel in regard to the

majority of things that were revealed to him: he knew that his life would be made a burden to him if he did otherwise; but now and again he said something to those of his comrades with whom he was most intimate. I remember there was a sergeant who had a reputation for being a bit too strict with the men under him. There was a good deal of grumbling about him off and on during our march through the desert. I did my best to keep things straight; the sergeant was a good soldier, but every day I could see that the feeling of irritation against him was increasing. Then all at once the grumbling ceased. I had the curiosity to inquire from one of the subalterns in his company if the man had become more lenient, but he told me that he was stricter than ever, only Macgregor had had a warning about him: he was not to survive the next engagement; that was why the men looked on him with pity—the pity one has for a doomed man. In the course of a week we had a brush with the Mahdists. Only one man on our side was killed—the sergeant."

"Ay, but if he had been warned would that have given him a chance?" asked Forbes.

"I can't tell," replied Sir Drummond. "Then again when we were working the boats up the Nile, and it seemed certain that we should be in time to save Gordon, a sudden gloom fell upon the men in our boat. Macgregor had seen the wraith of Gordon one night; he was able to give the details, as they afterwards came to light, of the last stand of the general in the face of that savage crowd that

did him to death. Mind you, that was a full week before the tragedy took place."

"Just so—just so."

"Of course, I did my best to ridicule the whole business at the time: I did not want the men to work as downcast men do, without any heart in what they are at, feeling that it will be of no good to any one; but I knew perfectly well that we should not reach Khartum in time to save Gordon, and so did every man in the regiment."

"The worst of this second sight is its indefiniteness," said Mr. Forbes, when Sir Drummond resumed his nervous pacing of the room, after he had related his experience.

"Indefiniteness!" cried the soldier. "I don't think there was anything indefinite in the account Macgregor gave us of Gordon's death."

"True, but what I mean is that none of these second-sight bodies can say when the incident that they foresee is to happen. That has always been against the prophet: he is never certain as to times and seasons. Our friend Moore, of almanac fame, binds himself down to dates, but, on the other hand, he is vague as regards details—that is how he contrives to save himself."

"I think I should be sorry ever after if I did not look to Meg at once," said Sir Drummond thoughtfully.

Mr. Forbes laughed.

"That was what was in my mind—your anxiety to be beside your girl—when I referred to the unsatisfactory nature of these second-sight warnings,"

said Mr. Forbes. "The man said nothing about the nature of the peril to Miss Meg, nor did he give a hint as to when the peril, whatever it may be, was to approach her. Now are you of a mind to keep her under your eye for the rest of your life? You'd have to do that, you know, if you were to guard her properly; and even then . . . oh, I wish Andrew Macfee had left his warning to himself. Such an utterance only disturbs a body without being of the slightest help to any one. The lassie is a bonnie one, and every bonnie lassie is in the midst o' perils, as you well know, Sir Drummond, but whether the danger to Miss Meg is to take place next week or in twenty years' time is a point on which we are left in doubt."

"I think I shall go to her all the same," said Sir Drummond.

"Then Heaven forbid that I should say a word to prevent you," said Forbes. "In the mean time, however, I suppose there is nothing more to be said about Douglas Athol, and the likelihood of his turning up to turn you out."

"I had almost forgotten about Douglas Athol," said Sir Drummond. "I am sure that you are rather wild at my bringing you all the way from London simply because our friend Andrew has had his visions."

"Well, I frankly confess that I looked for something more definite, Sir Drummond," replied the solicitor. "But if Andrew can offer us nothing more, there is nothing more to be said or done on the subject. Perhaps in the future, should we have

another warning on the subject, a letter might be sufficient, at least until further details were forthcoming. I admit, that while 'tis always a pleasure to serve you, Sir Drummond, and while I'm always glad of an excuse to take a run up North, I feel that a journey of five hundred miles at my time of life is——"

His good-natured complaint was never ended, for a servant entered the library, bearing the post-bag which had just arrived.

"One minute, my dear Forbes," said Sir Drummond, taking the bag and unlocking it somewhat nervously. "Perhaps there may be some communication here that will be illuminating to us. If there is not a letter from Meg I shall certainly go to her. Ah, here is her letter. So far . . ."

"Ay, so there is no need for apprehension," murmured the solicitor, as Sir Drummond laid the bag on a chair, and tore open the envelope addressed to him in his daughter's handwriting. While he was reading the letter that it enclosed, Mr. Forbes strolled about the room, at last standing below a beautiful picture that hung upon the wall beyond the oak fireplace. Since he had entered the room he had frequently allowed his eyes to stray toward it, but now he gave himself up to it, so to speak. He became absorbed in his study of the features that the painter had transferred to his canvas.

The portrait was of a very lovely girl standing in a woodland with her hand resting on the head of a magnificent collie dog. She looked to be perhaps a year or two over twenty, and her complexion

was that of a child who has been a good deal in the sun—bright and healthy. Her hair was nut brown, and it was dressed in no particular fashion. It is usually possible to tell from the fashion of the hair within a year or two of the date when any picture was painted during the past forty years; but in this portrait the artist had been clever enough—or it may have been the lady—to avoid introducing anything that might give a clue to the date when it was done. The hair was nearly all loose, some coils falling over the girl's shoulders, the rest knotted in a semi-classical file. The dress, too, belonged to no particular period. It was of maroon velvet, loosely fitting, so that much of it flowed behind the figure, conveying the idea of the rapid motion of the girl. The face was smiling in the most natural way, showing the shapeliness of the mouth and the archness of the eyes. The painting was undoubtedly a fine one technically, and there could scarcely be a second opinion in regard to the attractiveness of the subject. Several other portraits of women were set in the panels of the room, but this was one to which a stranger's eyes would certainly be drawn after glancing round the panels—this was certainly the one opposite which a man would stand very much as Mr. Forbes was standing, absorbing its delicate charm, and feeling exhilarated by the study of something so natural and so sweet.

Mr. Forbes was aware of a certain exhilaration as he looked at the picture. He felt for some time that, after all, his long railway journey had not been



taken in vain. The privilege of standing before such a picture was worth a good many tedious journeys. He was devoted to pictures when they were good, and the amount of money that he had "locked up"—that was his brother's phrase—in canvas was regarded by some of his friends as scandalous. He got no return for his outlay, they explained to him; and with most people he never argued. He only shook his head, saying—

"May be that—ay, may be that."

But he knew in his heart that the "return" which he got for the money which he invested in pictures—he did not hesitate to talk of them as "investments"—was not to be calculated on the basis of the percentage of the ordinary stocks and shares which he was in the habit of purchasing with great discrimination. And now as he stood looking at the beautiful face that smiled at him out of the panel, he felt that he had been ungenerous even to suggest a complaint to his host for having written such a letter as had left him no alternative but to hurry northward to confer with Sir Drummond upon a matter which appeared now to be but of secondary interest.

He gazed at the picture for long, and the thought that was in his mind—the feeling that was in his heart—was one of the deepest pity for the sweet girl, who nearly forty years ago had allowed herself to be persuaded into marrying a man with whom she had nothing in common—a man who had turned all the sweetness of her life to bitter-

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ness, and had sent her to her grave before her youth had more than passed.

The portrait was of Kenneth Athol's wife, the mother of Douglas Athol, who had been the subject of Andrew Macfee's second sight.

Mr. Forbes was fully acquainted with her story. She was the daughter of a half-pay lieutenant in the navy when Kenneth Athol, the wealthy Laird of Craig Athol, met her in Edinburgh. He knew that she had given her promise to marry the son of one of her father's old messmates, who had gone out to India to make a name and a fortune for himself before coming home to claim her. But this fact only added zest to Kenneth Athol's pursuit of her. When she refused to listen to him, it seemed that no trick was too base for him to adopt to win her. Her father was poor and in wretched health. The fact of leaving his daughter practically unprovided for was weighing him down. It was the old story. On the one hand there was a poor lover with an uncertain fortune, on the other there was a rich man, the inheritor of an historical castle and a splendid estate. The one man was absent, the other was at hand, and his suit was urged by a dying man who was distracted at the thought of the child whom he idolized being thrown on the world. The result was inevitable. The absent lover, broiling in a counting-house in Calcutta, received instead of his customary letter, overflowing with affection, a formal announcement that the girl for whom he was working was about to marry another man. She hoped that the one to whom she

wrote would soon forget her, for she confessed that she knew she could never be worthy of him. She could only implore his forgiveness, and pray to Heaven that he would be happier than she could ever hope to be.

That was all. There was nothing whatever in the story that was new, not even excepting the repentance of the girl when she discovered the sort of man she had married—a coarse and violent bully, whose sole aim in life seemed to be to humiliate her. Stuart Forbes knew something of what her life had been during the ten years that she lived with Kenneth Athol. He knew that had it not been for the sake of the son whom she bore to him she would never have remained with such a husband.

She was devoted to her boy, Douglas, and she lived only for him. She lived long enough to wish with all her soul that the boy had died in his infancy. Her husband took a fiend's delight in mortifying her through him. Even while the boy was still in the nursery he felt his father's cruelty, and before he went to school he knew enough of him to hate him. But he never feared him. He bore thrashing after thrashing rather than ask his father's forgiveness even when he knew that he was in the wrong. His spirit was never broken until his mother, poor soul, was carried to her grave. Douglas was then ten years of age; he had always been passionately devoted to his mother, and he was ready to make any sacrifice in order to obey her dying injunction to him, which was to bear with his father for her sake. He had humbled himself

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before Kenneth Athol, and for years he had submitted to his caprices and cruelties without a murmur; though more than once he had run away from the Castle, and lived for weeks at a time with Andrew Macfee or some of the other tenants on the estate, when he found it impossible to remain in the house with his father, and it was only for the sake of the people who were kind to him and had braved the Laird's wrath by giving him shelter that he returned to the Castle.

For seven years he lived in this way, and then one day, after a quarrel with his father that did not pass without an exchange of blows, he disappeared. He was traced to Edinburgh and to Leith, but no further. His father took no trouble to discover his whereabouts. He had merely laughed when the servants told him that Master Douglas had left the Castle.

"A good riddance," he had growled, "but don't tear but that he'll come crawling back before the end of the week. He'll soon tire of sulking, the rascal! But I'll break his spirit for him before he crosses the threshold of my house. I'll teach him who is to be master here."

But the week passed without seeing the return of Douglas, and a second and a third week went by, and still no news came of him. His father then began to make inquiries regarding him. He thought to surprise him at the cottage of some tenant, but his attempts to do so were followed by failure. When six months had passed the man awakened to the truth: his son would not return.

How many years ago had that happened? Mr. Forbes reckoned that eighteen years had gone by without the slightest clue being discovered as to the direction taken by the boy when he left the port of Leith; and in the mean time his father had died, and it became necessary to resume the search for the heir to the Craig Athol estate. Advertisements were inserted in all the colonial newspapers, and within the next year there was no lack of claimants to the property. Nearly all bore on their faces evidence of fraud. Most of them asked for remittances on a liberal scale to enable the applicants to pay their debts and provide for the purchase of first-class tickets to England. Several offered in return for an immediate payment of a few paltry hundred pounds to give such information as would enable the advertisers to lay their hands at once upon Douglas Athol. But an investigation into the antecedents of the most promising of these gentlemen was sufficient to prove to Mr. Forbes and Sir Drummond Athol that nothing was to be hoped from them.

It was not until three years had passed that the Courts of Law were applied to in order to allow of Sir Drummond's entering into possession of the property; and even then the latter gave an undertaking to retire in favour of Kenneth Athol's son should he ever come forward to claim his inheritance.

During the next few years the new laird caused his solicitor no little worry; for he was so scrupulous—so quixotically scrupulous, Mr. Forbes

thought—that he never neglected to follow up—for some distance, at any rate—the many suggestions that occurred to him for the discovery of the missing man, and to account for his long absence. But never before had he brought Mr. Forbes to his side to take counsel with him upon so unpractical a basis as that which now caused him to be present in the library looking at the beautiful face in the picture, and wondering what the visitors to the Royal Academy Exhibition would think if such a picture were to appear on the walls of Burlington House only with a halo round the girl's head, and entitled "The Martyr."

His retrospect and reflections were broken in on by a laugh from his host. He turned round and saw Sir Drummond leaning back in his chair beaming with merriment while several sheets of a letter lay on his knee. Mr. Forbes had not even heard the rustling of the paper, so absorbed had he been in his own thoughts.

"The peril—the peril—Andrew was right: Meg was in great peril—the greatest that can face a girl; but thank Heaven she is now free from it," cried Sir Drummond, still beaming.

"May be that," said Mr. Forbes. "And what might be the peril that provokes your merriment, Sir Drummond?"

"A grievous peril, my friend! A man has been making love to her, and wanting her to run away with him."

"A perilous case truly. But she didn't accept his invitation?"

"That was how she escaped the peril that threatened her. Meg was greatly amused by the affair. The ardent suitor is an Italian. We met him in London several times last June. He is quite an eligible man—at least he would be if he were not a foreigner with the title of Barone. I saw Meg had inspired him with a tender—I mean a tempestuous passion; and he was evermore turning up when least expected, and bothering us generally. But he was such a boy we could not bear to snub him. He was very ardent and sentimental. The most hopeless of all mental diseases is the sentimental, Forbes."

"Ay; and so he followed her to where she is staying? He was in earnest, at any rate."

"That was the worst of it. He is terribly in earnest. Well, Meg has, at any rate, escaped the peril of eloping with an Italian baron."

"I suppose that was the trouble that excited our friend Andrew?"

"I don't doubt it. I think we may be easy in our minds in regard to Meg. She has a sense of humour. She writes a most amusing account of the final scene. The man wept—actually wept! That's what sentimentality does for a man who cultivates it."

During the remainder of the day Sir Drummond referred occasionally to the risk which his daughter had run in being the object of the tempestuous regard of the Italian, and his guest perceived that he was no longer affected by what Andrew Macfee had said respecting his daughter's peril. He never

once suggested, as he had done before, the advisability of hurrying to his daughter's side; nor did he even refer to Andrew's second-sight revelations regarding Douglas Athol.

Mr. Forbes went early to his room that night. He had had a good trudge round the moor with Sir Drummond in the afternoon, and having had only an hour or two of sleep in the train the night before he was quite ready for bed.

It seemed to him that he had scarcely more than closed his eyes when he found himself sitting up in his bed wondering was it a nightmare that had caused him to fancy that he had heard a long shriek echoing through the wing of the Castle in which he was located.

He struck a light and found that midnight was just passed, so that he must have slept for three hours. He extinguished his candle, and was about to lie down once more, when there rang through the air another long weird shriek—another and another.

He was an elderly man, and cautious, as a rule; but there was something about those cries that prevented him from taking any thought for himself—from even pausing for a moment to ask himself what course would be prudent for him to pursue. He sprang out of bed, and hastily put on some garments, and thrust his feet into a pair of slippers. He looked round the room for something that might serve him as a weapon in an emergency, but he found nothing more formidable than a small but heavy brass curtain rod that a servant must have accidentally left in a corner.



But the moment he left his room his sense of caution returned to him. He went noiselessly along the corridor, and looked over the rail of the staircase. He saw that the door of the library was half open, and through the open space a light streamed. That was enough for him. He hurried down the stairs and across the hall in the direction of the light.

Only for a moment did he look through the space of the open door, then he drew back his head with an exclamation of horror.

A half-dressed woman was lying face downward on the carpet in a pool of blood.

## CHAPTER IV

HE had scarcely entered the room before he heard voices behind him.

"In Heaven's name what has happened?" cried Sir Drummond, who had hurried down-stairs with a revolver in his hand.

"Lord only knows, sir," came the trembling voice of the butler. "I heard the cries—I hope I may never hear another such. Why, what is this—Mary Allen—dead—is she dead, sir?"

Mr. Forbes had raised the woman from the floor, and he recognized the face of one of the housemaids who had been in service at the Castle for a year. She was unconscious, and bleeding freely from a wound at the side of her head.

"Water—some cold water quickly and the brandy decanter," said Sir Drummond to the half-dressed butler, who hurried off for his keys, not waiting to answer any of the many questions put to him by the servants, who by this time were crowding round the door.

Before the butler had come back with the carafe of cold water, the young woman gave signs of returning animation.

She opened her eyes for a few moments, and made a spasmodic attempt to speak. Then she

raised a hand, and feebly pointed directly from where she was lying on a sofa to the picture of the girl with the dog. The effort was too much for her. Her arm dropped limply by her side over the edge of the pillow, with the outstretched fingers swaying within an inch or two of the carpet.

Sir Drummond said a few soothing words to her, and administered a glass of brandy with a little water, which seemed to benefit her. She sighed, and opened her eyes once more, and now their expression was not nearly so wild as it had been. Then she raised her hand to her head.

"My poor girl," said Sir Drummond, "you have been hurt; but the wound is not deadly. It will be all right when we have bathed it and bandaged it. How did it happen? Do you remember? Were you struck by any weapon?"

Mr. Forbes shook his head.

"Best not force her to think in her present condition," he muttered in the ear of Sir Drummond.

The latter smiled.

"It is a simple cut, though it did bleed a good deal," he replied. Then turning to the girl, he said—

"Well, well, don't bother your poor head trying to think what happened. You will be all right in half-an-hour, and then you can let us know."

Another of the maids had by this time, in obedience to the orders of Sir Drummond, brought a basin of water and had begun to sponge the wound. The sight of the ruddy water (as it soon became) was too much for one of the footmen who stood by

with a jug—he gave a hysterical cry and fell into a chair—an act which the butler accepted as a gross piece of bad manners. The bare idea of a footman sitting down in the presence of his master shocked him; and in addition the man was in one of the library chairs and a stranger gentleman was present! He rated the unhappy footman soundly in an undertone, and Sir Drummond as well as his guest laughed, especially when the butler alluded to the culprit as “six foot o’ ill manners.”

The man’s cry, however, seemed to act as a stimulus upon the girl on the sofa, for she raised her head for a second or two, and then said—

“I’m all right now; it was the fall—I was so scared when I saw him that I cried out and—yes, I believe that it was the corner of the bookcase that caught me. But what was he doing there? Where is he? I can’t see him in the room. Black he was—black!”

She looked round the room rather wildly.

“Don’t bother yourself about anything now, my girl,” said Sir Drummond. “You can tell us all about it in the morning. You will be able to go to your bed in a short time, and after a good sleep you will be all right.”

“I’m all right now, sir, thank you,” said the girl in a voice so weak as to negative her statement. “What I know is—is—oh, mercy! he was black—black as the Evil One; Heaven help us! What did he mean by standing there—there, I tell you—talking away to the picture as if it was alive

—his sweetheart!—that's what he did, and I doubt that 'tis a house with a curse on it or such a thing would never have happened."

Her voice became weaker, and she closed her eyes. She had plainly had a terrible fright from the effects of which, rather than from the immediate consequences of her wounded head, she was still suffering.

"Now don't think anything more of the affair, like a good girl, and you shall tell us all in the morning," said Sir Drummond soothingly, patting the girl's hand. "Whatever took place we are sure that you did your best—no blame attaches to you."

The housekeeper, who had come on the scene rather late—she was wearing a black silk dress hooked in a very comical way—gave quite a perceptible sniff at Sir Drummond's assurance to the suffering girl.

"Nae blame?—we'll see aboot that in the morn," she murmured to the butler. Only the butler and a parlourmaid remained of the entire staff that had crowded into the room. The housekeeper had "packed them all off to their beds," within a few minutes of her entrance.

"Oh, yes, Sir Drummond, we'll look after her, never fear," she said in response to his instructions to her. "Oh, no, she's not very bad, only a bit flighty. There's nothing like Kirkham's lotion for such wounds, sir, and Maxwell and me will put on the right sort of bandage. We've plenty of lint. The first thing to do is to get her into her bed.

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"We'll know in the morn how she came to be oot o' it at such an hour."

"You must ask her nothing except in my presence, Mrs. Anderson," said Sir Drummond.

"Of course not, sir, and not one of the staff will be let draw nigh to her—'tis full enough of common gossip they are already, and that's the truth, Sir Drummond," said the housekeeper.

"Quite right," said Sir Drummond. "Good-night."

"What's the meaning of the window being open?" asked Mr. Forbes in a whisper, as he was leaving the room by the side of his host. The window from the library being a French one, opening on hinges to the floor, served as a door to the terrace.

"Is it open?" said Sir Drummond. "I never noticed it."

"You could not: the curtains were drawn in front of it," said Forbes. "I wonder if somebody was in the room, after all?"

"I don't suppose that that window is locked half-a-dozen times in the course of a year," said Sir Drummond. "Any one might enter who had a mind; but who would have a mind to burgle a highland castle? The crime is unheard of. No; I greatly fear that Mary Allen has a lover."

"Ay, that was in my mind too; Master Cupid has the freedom of even the most out-of-the-way castle in the Highlands, and he breaks in where burglars fear to tread. All the same the lover theory explains very little of the girl's story—such

as I caught sound of. She talked of a black man—and if she went to the library by appointment with her young man why should she be found by us in a heap on the floor with a wound in her head?"

"That certainly remains to be explained. The nigger element that she introduced is—well, these people have a fantastic imagination; and when they have a story to tell they are mindful of the picturesque elements that it must contain."

"That's true—I have noticed it before, especially when the witnesses under examination are women. That's how the black man came to be introduced, you think?"

"Well, that is one way of accounting for his introduction—that's all that I venture to say just now. But as you know a good deal better than myself, how frequently a black man—in fact, *the* Black Man enters into Highland stories, I fancy that our young woman had him ready for any emergency."

Mr. Forbes shook his head.

"She hadn't a deal of time to make up her story," he said. "The moment she opened her eyes out it came."

"Oh, I don't doubt she fancied at that moment that she had had a visit from the gentleman in black," laughed Sir Drummond. "If she hadn't how would she be able to account for the unhappy sequel? She fell and knocked her head——"

"Therefore she believed that she had that sombre visitant?" said Mr. Forbes.

"Something that way; it is difficult getting behind these people and understanding something of the working of their minds. They are dreadfully superstitious. We shall learn something in the morning. I'm greatly concerned that this thing happened on the first night of your visit, when you needed rest to recuperate after your journey."

"Don't annoy yourself, Sir Drummond. I'll be asleep again in five minutes. My word, that young woman showed that she had a singularly penetrating voice. Her shriek was something ghastly."

So the two men parted at the head of the staircase. Going to their respective rooms they could hear the housekeeper and her assistant helping the wounded servant to walk down the corridor leading to one portion of the servants' apartments.

But when Mr. Forbes got into bed again he found that he had spoken rather too quickly in regard to his own sleeping. More than an hour had passed before he was able to close his eyes. The adventure of the night had taken too firm a hold upon him for comfort. It was not that the weird shrieks of the girl were still ringing in his ears; it was rather the strange story which she had told in gasps, immediately on regaining consciousness, that kept him awake.

He recollected the look that was on her face when she pointed a trembling finger toward the picture of Kenneth Athol's lovely young wife, and talked about seeing some man stand before it speaking to it as if it were a living thing.

Whatever Sir Drummond might say, that was a



very curious story for a housemaid to invent on the spur of the moment to conceal a possible delinquency of her own. He felt this very deeply. And then he went on to ask himself what measure of accuracy there might be in the girl's story. Had she actually seen some one in the room, or had she only imagined that she had seen some one? He did not find it easy to come to a satisfactory—even a moderately satisfactory conclusion on this point. But the night was dark; his room was black as ink—a good deal blacker than the ink on some of the documents that Mr. Forbes had occasionally to inspect—his nerves had been considerably shaken by the manner of his awaking from his sound sleep—and these combined circumstances had their influence upon him.

Great heavens! was this part of the punishment that was being meted out to Kenneth Athol—to be forced to return in spirit to late home, and to stand face to face with the image of the woman whom he had so ill-treated that death must have come to her as a happy release from her sufferings at his hands?

That was the thought which came to the elderly solicitor, who was looked upon by all the world as the most prosaic—the most unimaginative of men.

What had Sir Drummond said to him at the moment of their separating?

"They are dreadfully superstitious!" he had muttered, referring to the servants. Undoubtedly they were; but Mr. Forbes wondered if the most super-

stitious of them would have the courage to suggest that it was the ghost of the wicked Laird of Craig Athol the maidservant had seen, causing her to shriek out and to fall senseless on the floor.

But believing as he did in the justice of Heaven—in the meting out of rewards to the just, and punishments extending far beyond their life on earth to evil doers, he could not feel that there was anything inconsistent in his considering it within the bounds of possibility that Kenneth Athol's punishment should take the form suggested by his own thoughts.

"Black—black—ay, that is how he would appear if a man's soul is tinged by his acts in this life, for a fouler soul than Kenneth Athol's never made human clay its tenement," said Mr. Forbes, allowing his thoughts to run on still further into all the details of the girl's explanation of how she was overcome.

He became quite possessed by his theory of the Laird's punishment; but if the effect of his early association with the people who believed in wraiths and witches and warlocks and second sight and such like mysteries had remained with him in spite of his long separation from such influences, the characteristic caution of his race made him see that it would be unadvisable to communicate his belief to any one. He was well aware of the fact that if the Castle once got the name of being haunted by the unquiet spirit of the evil-living Laird, the family of the existing Laird might be greatly inconvenienced. No servants would remain in the

place, and if ever it became necessary to let it there might be considerable difficulty in finding a tenant for an abode with such a reputation.

Before Mr. Forbes slept he had made up his mind that, whether or not a further consideration of the servant's story tended to confirm his theory, it would never do for him to take up any attitude except one that was distinctly hostile to the suggestion that the midnight visitant was a supernatural one. His training as a lawyer was a great help to him in forming such a resolution. He simply felt that he had been briefed by the family who were in possession of the Castle, so that it was his bounden duty to oppose everything that might be considered inimical to the interests of his clients. Yes, he would certainly pooh-pooh any suggestion of a ghost haunting the library at Craig Athol. Should anything of this sort be hinted at by the servants, who doubtless were, as Sir Drummond had described them, "dreadfully superstitious," he knew that he could fall back upon the fact of his having discovered the open door leading from the library to the terrace. This door would be very useful to him as an "emergency exit," so to speak. If they hinted at a ghost, he would ask them what on earth a ghost had to do with an open window or an open door. Did not every one who had the least acquaintance with ghosts and their ways know perfectly well that they were quite independent of such means of access to a house?

He hoped that his adoption of such a scheme of

ridicule would be effective; but all the same he hoped very much more earnestly that the housemaid, Mary Allen, would hold her tongue on the subject of her midnight visitant. He made up his mind that if she showed herself inclined to talk she would have to be severely dealt with; or generously dealt with; but he was rather inclined to severity to ensure her silence.

He lost no time in having an interview with the young woman the next day. She was able to sit up in the housekeeper's room, the wound on her head was not serious, although at first it had bled a good deal, leading Mr. Forbes to form the impression, when he had first looked into the library, that she had been desperately handled. Before he went to have his chat with her he had a chat with the housekeeper. From this vigilant person he learnt that Mary Allen's character was an excellent one. She was a daughter of a crofter on a neighbouring estate, and her brother was one of Sir Drummond's underkeepers. She had been engaged for more than a year to a young man in good employment in Paisley, and she was to be married to him at the beginning of the year; she was not the girl to have a second lover, the housekeeper said.

"Then how about the menservants at the Castle—would any of them be in the way of playing off a trick, do you think?" asked Mr. Forbes.

The housekeeper shook her head.

"I expect that some of them would be as likely as not to have a bit of a lark and to keep within

the bounds of decency at the same time," she replied. "But only a fool man would see any fun in coming in at a window not in the servants' quarters, and so running the chance of being shot for a burglar."

"What about the other maids?" asked Mr. Forbes. "Is it not likely that one of them might have a lad, and be ready to make a midnight appointment with him?"

"Such things have happened, and young women and young men have before now shown themselves ready to take all risks for the sake of a kiss," said Sir Drummond encouragingly.

But the housekeeper continued shaking her head.

"Then what about sleep-walking? Is it known that Mary Allen was in the habit of walking in her sleep?" asked Mr. Forbes.

The housekeeper showed that this theory was not applicable to the case of Mary Allen. She had not left her room to go to the library without consulting with her fellow-servant who occupied the room jointly with herself. The facts of the case were as follows: the two girls were sleeping in a room close to the library, and one of them—a notoriously light sleeper—was awakened by a sound as of someone working at the latch of the library window. She aroused her companion, and as they fancied they heard the sound repeated, Mary had hastily put on some clothes and hurried off to arouse the housekeeper. Going down the corridor, however, she had thought that before giving the alarm she might as well look into the library. She did so, and—

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well, that was all. Sir Drummond and Mr. Forbes knew the rest.

These details, communicated by the housekeeper, were borne out by Mary herself, when they went to her. Sir Drummond encouraged her to say all that she could. He praised her for her bravery in entering the room alone; he did not believe that there was a man among the servants who would have had the courage to do so much.

The girl was, however, sensible enough to know that she had done a foolish thing in looking into the library when she was on her way to the housekeeper. If burglars had been there they would have made short work of her, she said. But Sir Drummond would not allow that her act was the less courageous on that account. And then he asked her if she was still certain that she had seen some one in the room.

"Certain, sir! oh, quite certain," she said in a low voice. "I never saw anything so uncanny, sir. He was standing there in front of the picture, and the light seemed to stream from his body upon the picture, for it was brighter than ever I had seen it before—the body seemed alive and stepping out of the frame. He did not hear me turn the handle of the door, and he went on talking to her, as he must have been before, in a low but dreadfully deep voice."

"What did he say to her?" inquired Mr. Forbes.

"He spoke too much in a murmur to let me hear all," replied the girl; "but I heard him say that he had left a hot place to come and see her, and his

heart was so full of love for her he had never had a thought for any other woman since she had left him lonely. That was about all I heard, sir. I suppose I must have made some noise, or maybe he saw the flicker of my candle, for he turned quickly round, and saw me. That was when I must have called out."

"An elderly man?" suggested Sir Drummond.

"Oh, no, sir; youngish, but not young—under forty by some years, as it seemed to me."

"And did you notice anything strange about him?" asked Mr. Forbes when she made a pause.

"His face was black, sir," she said in a whisper.

"That was what frightened me."

"There are many sorts of black men," said Sir Drummond. "You have seen negroes—I don't mean negro minstrels, who are mostly white men painted—was he a negro with woolly hair and thick lips?"

"No, no; he was not a bit ugly. That frightened me all the more," said the girl.

Mr. Forbes was acute enough to see what she meant. She had heard that the Evil One was rather handsome than otherwise. That was how he was so dangerous. He attracted people rather than repelled them.

"And then he made a rush for the window?" said he.

"He made a flame of fire rush round the room like a ring, and in that flame he vanished, and I felt myself falling—my legs seemed to give way under me."

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"One more question I should like to ask," said Mr. Forbes.

But what this question was was not revealed at that time, for the butler knocked at the door of the room, saying—

"A telegram for you, Sir Drummond."

Sir Drummond tore off the cover, glanced at the telegram, and dropped into the nearest chair.

"Heavens above!" he cried. "Andrew Macfee was right—a disaster—Meg—a disaster!"



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## CHAPTER V

BELFIELD MANOR was admitted to be one of the most picturesquely situated houses to be found—after a pretty fair amount of searching—on or about the Yorkshire Moors. But the elements of picturesqueness are not the elements of comfort.

Belfield was seven miles away from any railway station and two from any village. Thus it had ever need to be what the house-agents term "self-contained." Its occupants could not depend upon either butcher or baker or candlestick-maker, the modern equivalent of the last-named being the electric light company. Having occupied the old house for something like three hundred years, however, the family of Egremont had become very self-reliant. They were absolutely patriarchal in their way of living. They had a home farm upon which they drew for their beef and mutton. They owned about twenty thousand acres of moorland, from which they had an ample supply of grouse, and a trout stream ran through a glen at the bottom of their gardens, and as it was not within twenty miles of any of the poisonous factories it was always well stocked with healthy fish. It was this same stream, too, that generated the electricity which illuminated every room in this old mansion.

Only strangers visiting the place, referred to it as either dreary or lonely. Dreary it certainly was not, for Mrs. Egremont had not allowed her husband's long absence from home—he was Governor of a rather important Crown Colony—to interfere with the traditional hospitality of Belfield Manor. The house was rarely without visitors at any season, so that the trout had rather a lively time of it, and the grouse a still livelier—while it lasted. Only one month in the year did Mrs. Egremont reserve for herself and her favourite niece, Meg Athol. Meg had even in her schoolroom days been accustomed to spend a full month in the society of her aunt only, and she had come to look forward to it as one of the pleasantest of the year. She loved the Yorkshire moors only second to those of her own native Scotland; she had become accustomed to long rides and to curious explorations of such parts of the great county as were unfamiliar to her. Her aunt used to call her the Columbus of Yorkshire, and she certainly possessed a large portion of the spirit of the old discoverer. Her caravel was her trusty mare, Bluebell, and mounted on her back she had found her way over moor and fell, until the country had few secrets from her.

Mrs. Egremont had been accustomed for several years to take part with her in her numerous expeditions, but during the latter part of her annual visit Meg generally found herself alone. Her aunt was no longer so young as she had been, but knowing how greatly the girl enjoyed these explorations, she insisted on her keeping them up, even when she

herself did not feel disposed to accompany her. Meg was, however, considerate, and she never went very far away when alone. As for the thought of there being any danger in these excursions it was never entertained by either Mrs. Egremont or her niece; on the contrary, they both felt a complete sense of security here: the moors were their home, and where could any one be safer than at home?

Meg's visit to her aunt was approaching its close. The grouse shooting at Craig Athol would begin in a week or two, and then the Castle would be full of her father's guests, in whose entertainment she would have to join. Only a few days longer might she enjoy the sense of liberty that came to her through association with these moors, and her aunt advised her to make the most of them while she could. The episode of the visit of her Italian admirer, of which she had given so full an account to her father, had not interfered greatly with her pleasure. She had a feeling that the young man would not take his rebuff greatly to heart. He belonged to a nation whose love-making is quickly hot and as quickly cold. In the course of a very short time the Barone would find ample consolation for his disappointment in the smiles of one of his own country-women.

On the morning of the day on which Sir Drummond received the telegram giving him the news that he had communicated to Mr. Forbes, Mrs. Egremont came to Meg in great haste immediately after breakfast, saying--

"My dear girl, are you inclined for a ride?"

"I'm always inclined for a ride, as you well know, you dear old pretender," replied the girl. "Only I don't signify by that name, a mild excursion to Bainby; nothing under nine miles is a ride."

"Would you be equal to a trip to Glanbury?" asked Mrs. Egremont.

"There is nothing I should like better," said Meg with enthusiasm. "Nine miles across the moor, and an extra mile home by the road! What more could any one wish for?"

"Not much, provided that one has youth and enthusiasm."

"Yes, and a mount like Bluebell. In the case of a good ride I think that the mount should be taken into consideration. I'll say any number of good words about Bluebell. She has never failed me."

"Then sound the 'boot and saddle'; you must start without delay if you mean to be back in time for dinner."

"Oh, never fear that we'll be back in good time, Bluebell and I. She knows how to travel with the smallest amount of exertion. A gallop on the moors for a couple of miles just to get her wind, then a walk for three and the rest a gentle jog-trot. That will take us to Glanbury in an hour and a quarter. Then we must have a good feed, and after an hour's rest an amble home. Oh, we shall be back in time for tea. But what is the excuse that you are about to invent for giving me so pleasant an excursion? Have you thought it out yet?"

Mrs. Egremont smiled.

"The truth is that I wish to be rid of you for the greater part of the day," she said, "but the excuse is, as usual, supplies. That new cook is like a new broom; she makes a clean sweep of everything in the larder, and then forgets to ask the housekeeper to order half-a-dozen necessities of life until the last minute. I have a list made out for you here; this is of the necessities. Here is another——"

"Of the unnecessaries? Oh, silk to be matched. I wonder if they will be able to match it at Crowe's."

"That is the point on which I am doubtful, hence the need to send you in person, my dear."

"I let the excuse pass, it is a much more plausible one than many which you have invented to give me a good day's outing. But why—oh, why will you not make my happiness complete by coming with me? You know perfectly well that you are still as hard as nails on horseback."

Mrs. Egremont shook her head.

"I have given my sacred promise to your uncle," she said.

"Oh, what does a sacred promise to a husband matter?" cried Meg. "And you know that you only promised in an indefinite way not to over-do it. Now confess that the exact words of your sacred promise were those—'not to over-do it'?"

"I see that you are doing your best to get out of going on my errand," said Mrs. Egremont. "Well, never mind; after all, I can easily send William."

"Can you, my dear lady?" laughed the girl. "Do you fancy that the divine William will succeed in matching your silk? Oh, send William, by all means."

"Seriously, Meg, I do not feel equal to such a distance, or you may be sure that I would go with you," said her aunt. "Get along with you now, and mind you make a good lunch at Bower's—don't content yourself with a bun and a cup of cocoa."

"You may depend on me—I'll make you a sacred promise to spend half-a-crown on my lunch and to eat three shillings' worth at that."

She kissed her aunt, and rang the telephone bell to the stables to order Bluebell to be saddled. In half-an-hour she had put on her habit and was galloping across the moors that she loved so well, in the direction of Glanbury, that important town of twelve thousand inhabitants, which was the nearest shopping centre to Belfield Manor. The day was a lovely one, and the air of the moorland so bracing that the girl was tempted to turn her mare from the well-known track, and to pass close to the majestic ruins of Oswellstone Priory, and the consequence was that she arrived at Glanbury more than half-an-hour later than she had calculated on. But this only meant that she had to do her shopping much faster and spend less time over her lunch. Of course, Bluebell's well-earned rest was curtailed in the same proportion; but having been ridden leisurely and without too much cantering, the animal would certainly not feel that she was being badly treated. Miss Athol would not on any

consideration allow her mare to have such a suspicion.

She set out on her return journey early in the afternoon, taking the high road as far as Wendover, four miles from Glanbury, and then turning into a subsidiary highway that led over one of the highest moors, where it was crossed by a bridle-path that sloped downward to Merley Dale. Before she left the Wendover road she was rather surprised when there trotted past her a man whom she had herself passed on the moorland only a few miles from the Manor. She had noticed him also in the High Street of Glanbury, and had thought for a moment that it was rather curious that he should have made the same journey as herself. She did not know the man, however, and so had not thought further on the coincidence. But now when he went by her on a little-frequented road she was more than surprised. Still she was not so absurd as to consider that there was anything remarkable in the coincidence. The man had plainly had business to do in the town, and having done it, he was naturally returning by the road she had selected; he could scarcely do otherwise if he had originally come from the neighbourhood of Belfield.

There was the usual amount of traffic on the road through Merley Dale—a wagon or two with light loads, a tradesman's van or two—a miller's cart with sacks of flour, and an occasional farmer mounted on an ambling hack, that might certainly be described with accuracy as steady to drive or

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ride—perhaps to plough in an emergency. But when she got on the narrow moorland path a few miles further on she found herself, as she expected she should, quite alone. It crossed a part of the moor, and then joined the old road to the village of Mallingthwaite, which had become almost wholly disused by general travellers on account of the very steep bit that had to be encountered by any one going to the village. People preferred making a detour of a mile which brought them to the flat road that went straight through the village. Meg, however, when on horseback found it much more convenient to take the old road, steep and all though it was; it saved her a good mile on her journey to the Manor.

As she expected, she had this road all to herself, so she had ample opportunities of admiring the romantic scenery on her right hand, where there were high rocks with a small forest of larch growing in the crevices. On the other side there was a deep gorge, known as Deadman's Hollow.

In spite of its uncanny name it was here that she pulled up her mare to give her a rest before breasting the hill in front of her. She had not halted for more than a few minutes before she heard the sound of wheels behind her. She glanced round in surprise, for often as she had come along this way she had never seen a vehicle on the road. She saw that now it was a covered chaise with two horses, which was travelling in her direction. But before she had quite satisfied her curiosity in this direction she was startled by a sound in front of



her. A man on horseback—she saw that it was the same who had ridden past her a short time before, and whom she had seen on the moor early in the day—had come from behind the shelter of wooded crags, leaping his mount across the ditch on the roadside, and stopping in the middle of the road.

She was startled, and so was Bluebell. The mare had backed until she was on the brink of the gorge. But Meg retained command of her, and quieting her with a few encouraging words, put her to the hill. In a second the man on the horse had wheeled his animal so that it blocked the narrow way.

"Be good enough to let me pass," said the girl, when Bluebell stood still, puzzled by tactics such as she had never encountered before.

"I am sorry that I cannot oblige you, miss," said the man, and she became aware from the nature of his speech that he was a common man, and that he came from some place very much to the south of Yorkshire.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "How dare you block my way! I will tell the driver of this vehicle that is coming this way of your insolence."

The man laughed. She was in the act of wheeling her mare about when he suddenly urged his horse forward and caught her reins. Only for a second, however, did he retain them, for even before his fingers had tightened over the leather she had struck him across the face with her riding whip. It was a light thing of whalebone and whip-cord, with a silver handle, but her blow was quite

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enough to cut deep into the man's flesh, and with an oath he released her reins to put his hand up to his face. By this time the vehicle which had been driving quickly up, had stopped not a dozen yards away, and turning her mare she saw that a man who had been by the side of the coachman had noticed (as she fancied) the insult to which she had been subjected, and was coming to her assistance. Two other men were descending from the machine.

"I must ask your help; you saw how that man stopped me?" cried Meg to the foremost of the three.

"The scoundrel!" he cried. "I saw all. We are your friends. Let me help you to dismount."

"There is no need," she said. "All that I ask of you is to prevent him from following me until I get to the top of the hill."

"You are mistaken, miss," said the man. "We cannot help you unless you dismount."

"That's the truth," cried the second, who had now come up, and he went to Bluebell's head. "There's nothing for it but to leave your saddle, miss. We'll take care that the scoundrel does not harm you."

"I tell you again that there is no need for me to dismount, and I do not mean to do so," said Meg decisively. "If you wish to help me you will keep that man with you until I get a start of him. I am quite close to my home: I am Mrs. Egremont's niece of Belfield Manor. Leave go of my horse, please."

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"Come, miss, be advised by us," said the third man. "We're all your friends, and we know what's for your own good. You must trust us if you wish us to help you, and we advise you to dismount."

Then she saw that the men who had come in the closed landau were confederates with the horseman. She was the victim of some horrid plot.

What could she do? Situated as she was, she was utterly helpless. The road was, as she knew, practically disused, there was little or no chance of any one appearing to whom she might make an appeal for assistance. One man was at Bluebell's head, with his hand on the chock of the bit, a second was just behind her stirrup, while the one on horseback was barring the way to the hill.

What was left for her to do?

Well, all that she could do was to cry out for help. Though she knew that it was extremely unlikely that she should be heard by any one, she shouted "Help—help—help!" in her loudest voice. It was as much as the man at Bluebell's head could do to hold the animal, and the men on each side of her had need to be agile to avoid the swing round of her flanks.

"Pull her off and have done with it, can't you?" shouted the horseman brutally.

"Look ye here, miss," said the man who held the bridle, "I give you my word—my oath—that not a hair of your head will be harmed if you only do what you are told. Don't think that we're a bad lot, miss. If we thought that any harm would

come of it we would ha' nothing to say to the job. You may depend on us, miss."

"If you had any feeling of men about you, you would not act this way towards a helpless girl," she said. "If it is money you want——"

She struck at the man's face as he sprang upon her, but the blow did not keep him back for a single second. He had his arm about her waist, and lifted her out of her saddle and on to the road before she could cry out again. He was a strong man, and she was like an infant in his hands. In spite of her struggles she had been lifted down quite gently.

The man held her firmly by the arm—then snatching the riding-whip from her hand he gave the mare a sharp cut across the flank, sending her at a gallop up the hill, her pace being accelerated by the man on the horse, who gave her another cut with his riding-crop.

Then before poor Meg could utter a protest the two men nearest to her forced her before them into the closed landau, and jumped in quickly after her, the third man mounted to the box beside the driver, who whipped up his horses.

"That's neatly managed," remarked one man to the other inside the vehicle.

"Couldn't be beaten," acquiesced the second.

Neither of them had noticed that just when Bluebell had got to the top of the hill, a young man came out from among the trees, and succeeded in snatching her bridle.

## CHAPTER VI

"WHAT is the meaning of this? Where are you carrying me?" cried Meg. "Who is at the bottom of this outrage?"

"Friends all, miss," said one of the men. "No harm is intended, as I said afore. For me, I'd sooner die than hurt a hair of your head, and that's the truth, so help me."

"How can it be the truth, when you know the way you have treated me?" said the girl. "Pulling me by force off my own horse! Is that what you call not hurting a hair of my head? Is that what you call being my friends? But tell me what it is all about. What have I done? What is wanted of me? I never heard of such a thing being done in England now a-days! But why should I be your victim? Oh, you must have made some absurd mistake. No one could wish to treat me in this way. I am General Egremont's niece. Has not some mistake been made?"

"No mistake in the world, miss," the man replied. "But make your mind easy, there's no offence intended."

"No offence! You pull me off my mare on the high road, and then carry me off, and tell me that no offence is meant!"

A sudden thought struck her. She had read of girls being abducted in this way and carried off to a lunatic asylum. Was it possible that these men had been sent on such a duty, and had picked her up instead of the one whom they meant to capture? If this was so she knew that the mistake would be cleared up the moment that she reached the place to which they were taking her.

But before she had gone very far she remembered how she had noticed the man on the horse on the moor shortly after she had left the Manor house; and later in the day in the High Street of Glanbury. This led her to believe that he had been spying upon her with a view to capturing her or giving information to the others, who had been told off to do the foul work; so that it was extremely unlikely that he had mistaken her for some one else. No, a plot had been laid with this intent—a base and outrageous plot to carry her away from her home and her natural protectors.

But what on earth was meant by such a transaction? Had these miscreants set up as Greek or Sicilian or Arabian banditti on the Yorkshire moors? She had heard of stray travellers being captured by these ruffians in order that a ransom might be paid by their relations. Was it possible that her captors had dreams of receiving money from her father for her safe return?

"Why cannot you have the common humanity to let me know what you mean to do with me?" she said, after a pause—the carriage in which she was seated being all this time driven at a smart

pace along the lonely narrow way which she had lately traversed. "What difference would it make to you if you were to let me know where you are carrying me, and for whom you are acting? Cannot you see that I am distracted at the thought that you mean something dreadful?"

"Make your mind easy, miss," said the man whom she addressed. "There's no harm will come to you. The fact is that a gent—"

"Hold your gabble, you fool! you'll be giving the whole show away if you go on answering her," cried the other. Then turning to Miss Athol, he said, "We're only simple men, miss, and glad to earn a day's wage. No harm is intended to yourself. There's no risk to you, it's us that runs the risk, and so must be paid for it. Have you ever thought how hard it is for the poor to live, miss?"

The girl could scarcely refrain from laughing to hear this pretty scoundrel ask for the sympathy of his victim. It was like the butcher begging the sheep to pity him on account of the low prices of mutton which prevented him from making a fortune.

"If you are badly off and want money I will give you my promise that, if you release me now, my father will pay you far more than you could possibly expect from any one for carrying me off," said she.

The man only shook his head.

"It's very 'ansome, miss, very 'ansome, I must say," said he. "But we dursn't run the chance.

Lord, miss, don't we well know that this is well nigh a 'anging matter—abducting of a young lady in broad daylight? If it wasn't that times is bad and very 'ard on poor folks like ourselves, we would have nothing to do with this business."

"But you can at least tell me where you are taking me," she said.

"That's the 'ardest thing of all to tell—least-ways for us," said the man. "It's sorry I am to disoblige a lady, and a well-favoured and 'andsome lady at that, but we've all swore to do the job and not to blab to man woman or child."

By this time the carriage had gone a considerable distance along the lonely part of the road. It was now approaching a part where it was crossed by the highway leading to some of the most important villages, and Meg, being well aware of this fact, began to be very hopeful of being able to attract the attention of some of the people, who would almost to a certainty be met just here. Even if she were not rescued immediately by some one, the alarm might be given by some strangers whose suspicions should be aroused. She was thinking what would be the best means of calling the attention of a stranger to her condition, when the man who had done most of the talking, and who was plainly the leader of the band, produced from the pocket of his overcoat a light knitted woollen shawl which he shook out of its folds.

"Now, miss," said he, "I must ask you to give us your sacred promise not to make any outcry, nor to call the attention of anybody we may meet either



on foot or on any vehicle of any character. If you can't see your way to do so much, all I can say is that we can't see our way to let you spoil our plans, so we'll have, in self-protection, miss, to wrap the lower part of your pretty face in this simple woollen stuff, warranted sound proof."

"You would dare to gag me?" she cried indignantly.

"No, no, miss; not a regular gag—only a voice protective this is—nothing worth talking about—certainly nothing worth talking into if so be that it's brought over your mouth. Now what do you reply to my offer, miss? We knows that you're a lady born and bred and that once you makes a promise even to a poor man, you'll keep it sacred and sure. Promise me that you'll not make any attempt to draw attention down upon us, and I put away this silly muffler once more into my pocket."

Meg considered the man's offer for a few seconds, then she said—

"I promise. I will trust you to keep your promise made to me that no harm shall come to me, so I do not refuse to agree to refrain from doing anything to attract the attention of any one we may meet or overtake."

"That's enough for me, miss," said the man, laying the woollen muffler across his knees. He did not put it back into his pocket. She could see that he kept it handy so that he could use it at a moment's notice should occasion arise.

It so happened, however, that the only vehicle

met upon this part of the road was a tradesman's cart, and the only passengers were a couple of cattle dealers who were returning home from some fair where they had clearly been indulging in a goodly number of pots of ale. Even if she had been free to call for help nothing would have come of her loudest appeals to such people.

After driving for a mile along this highway the carriage took a sudden turn upon a narrow road, which led, she fancied, to a moorland farm. This surmise, however, she soon found to be astray. It led upward, and apparently right across the moor. It became rougher and more uneven as it went along, and was certainly of the most primitive construction. Whither it led Meg had no idea. She thought that she had a good working knowledge of the paths and tracks of the moors, but, looking out on either side of the carriage she failed to see any landmark that she recognized. The road was probably a disused track between two villages, which at one time may have been of some importance, but which must have been in reduced circumstances for long; for it had well nigh become indistinguishable from the wild moorland itself.

By this time the afternoon was on the borderland of evening. The carriage must have been driven quite eight or nine miles from where Meg had been captured. It seemed that the horses were becoming tired. At any rate the driver pulled them up where a group of trees were huddled together, all bending weird arms in the same direction—that of the most prevalent wind that blew across the moors.

"This is as good a place as any; but is Jerry sure that this is the right track?" said one man to the other.

"All that Jerry doesn't know about the moors isn't worth anybody's knowing," replied the other.

"What are you waiting here for?" asked Meg.

"It may be that the horses wants a rest after coming over two miles of such a foundering road," replied one of the men. "Leastways, if the horses bean't tired there's others that is, and I'm one of them. 'A halt's a good thing,' says I, if so be that a man has some respect for his bones, and looks to come safe out of an unusual bit o' business what I won't deny this is."

Meg's brain was busy trying to account for the stoppage of the machine in this place. Could it be, she asked herself, that her abductors meant to remain in this remote spot until nightfall, so as to avoid the necessity of travelling along a frequented highway in broad daylight. It seemed plain to her that they were the agents in the carrying out of a diabolical plot, and one that was as cunningly contrived as it was executed boldly. It appeared to her that every detail connected with it had been considered, so that it was quite likely that the wretches had planned to remain with her on this unfrequented part of the moors until they thought it safe to proceed to the nearest high road; but what high road this would be she was unable to guess, although she was especially well acquainted with the district miles around.

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She was naturally on the verge of distraction, not knowing what fate was in store for her. Her only hope was that when her aunt found that she did not return that evening, she would lose no time in sending out search parties over every part of the moors. She reflected that the longer the carriage remained here the better chance there would be of her rescue being effected. Belfield Manor was so far away from any police centre that several hours were bound to elapse before any organized attempt to find out what had become of her could be made. Therefore she felt that every delay was of value.

And then she began to ask herself who could possibly be at the bottom of this dastardly outrage. What had she or her family done to any one to warrant such a scheme of revenge?

She found herself quite unable to answer such a question. She knew that her father was one of the most popular officers in the Service. He had no enemies—of that she was quite sure—unless—her thoughts went back to the question of her father's inheriting of the estate of Craig Athol. He had been wise enough to make her early acquainted with all the details of this business, telling her that she was not to look upon herself as the heiress to the property, until it should be definitely established that Douglas Athol was dead. To such a girl as Meg his caution meant very little. It was all the same to her whether she was an heiress or simply the daughter of an officer in His Majesty's Service, life meant life to her under all conditions. But now

she began to think if the plot of which she was the victim might not have been instigated by some one who believed that he was being wronged in connection with the inheritance.

She did not need to dwell for long upon this question. The only person who could have suffered wrong was Douglas Athol, and if he were alive all that he had to do was to come forward and take over the estates to which he was entitled.

Suddenly the thought flashed across her. The scheme and the method by which it had been accomplished were quite un-English; they savoured of the foreigner. Yes, certainly there was a foreign hand in the business. She gave a start. Good heavens! the Barone who had sought her hand, and had followed her up to Belfield Manor to implore her to marry him, creating quite a scene when she refused to listen to his wild implorations—why had she not thought of him before!

No, no; she could not for a moment believe that this man had anything to do with the plot. He was an Italian, but he was a gentleman, and whatever some of the more romantic and unscrupulous of his countrymen might do, he was too chivalrous to be guilty of anything so outrageous as this plot. She felt quite positive on this point. She felt that she might as soon suspect one of her English suitors as the Barone del Greppo.

So the evening approached. One of the men on the box seat fed the horses, and the other stood by smoking. After allowing her thoughts to wander in many directions, she began to think if it might

not be possible to escape from the clutches of her captors. When darkness came on, might she not have at least a chance of getting out of the vehicle and concealing herself on the moor in some place where she could not easily be found? She saw several spots where she fancied she could evade their search—there was a small plantation of larches where she might hide, and a mile or thereabouts behind there was a glen of high rocks and dense heather.

She lay back and closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep: she was afraid lest the expression on her face might be rightly interpreted by the men beside her. If they were to guess the thoughts which made her heart beat fast, and sent the blood to her face, they would become doubly vigilant. Her policy was, she knew, to throw them off their guard as much as possible, if she wished to escape from them.

And then suddenly something happened, which caused her to sit up, for one of the men on the box put his head round the front of the carriage, and growled—

"Keep your eye on her, there's some one coming."

The two men inside the vehicle seemed to pull themselves together.

"Don't fear for us," one of them replied. "We're only too sick of the whole job, a glass of beer wouldn't come amiss to either of us within the next half hour, would it, Steve?"

The other growled a sullen acquiescence.

Meg heard the thud of a horse's hoofs on the grass of the moor, and as the sound became more distinct, the careless whistle of a man acquainted with the lilt of a popular melody of the day. There was light enough in the air for her to see that the man opposite to her winked at the one who was beside her. Then on the grass-covered road she saw a man on horseback approaching; and at the same instant the driver of the carriage put his horses in motion.

"Mind, no sound, no signal, miss, or 'twill be worse for you," muttered the man nearest to her.

The horseman passed quite close to the window at which she sat; she could easily have hailed him; but she was the daughter of a Highland officer; she could not break her word even to the miscreants who had insulted her. She watched the man ride by without a word.

Her last chance was gone.

Was it?

She became aware of the sound of the horse trotting back upon its tracks.

"Hold hard there," cried the man in a commanding voice. "Whose carriage is that?"

He was trotting beside the vehicle, and she saw that he was a good-looking man, in appearance a gentleman.

The driver whipped up his horses, and the man on the box cried—

"What business is it to you whose carriage it is?"

The gentleman put spurs to his horse, and raised

his hunting-crop when he got alongside the box.

"Pull up, you insolent rascal, or I'll pull you down," he cried. "Tell me whose carriage you are driving, and what you are doing with that lady inside?"

The driver replied with an oath, and raised his whip menacingly. In another instant the stranger had jerked the reins out of his hands with the crook of his hunting-crop, and pulled the horses back upon their haunches.

The driver was thrown from the box by the suddenness of the stoppage, and Meg was almost flung against the seat opposite to where she sat. She just recovered herself in time to see the driver club his whip and rush at the stranger.

"I'll learn you to mind your own business," he yelled.

Then Meg heard the stranger's laugh as he pulled his horse's head round, saying—

"Will you?"

She saw the gleam of the steel barrel of a revolver which the gentleman presented full in the face of the infuriated driver.



## CHAPTER VII

THE effect of the appearance of that little tube of bright steel is at all times rather discomposing. However strong a man may feel, however anxious he may be to distinguish himself, the sight of a revolver barrel pointed straight at his head is apt to make him pause for a certain space of time. The man who was about to use his whip in club fashion, allowed the upraised handle to drop very gradually. His back was turned to Meg, but even his back had a sheepish expression.

"Now, hadn't you or some of your pals better begin teaching me that lesson which you promised?" said the horseman. "Do begin, some of you. I have six barrels at my service, and there are only four of you, that will leave me with two cartridges over from your lesson. Here, catch your reins, but if you make the smallest attempt to mount the box or to put your horses in motion it will be your last act on earth. Now tell me where you hope to take that lady—— No, don't trouble yourselves inventing a lie—the lady will tell me herself." He had come close to the window of the carriage, touching his cap with the hand that still grasped the stock of the revolver. "Madam," he said, "perhaps my suspicions are groundless; but it occurred to me, although I only had the merest

glance at you and the men beside you, that there was something in the situation that required explanation. Was I right or wrong? If the latter I shall offer you and these—these—gentlemen my humblest apologies, and ride on my way. Don't fear to tell me everything."

"You have saved me," she said, turning the handle and flinging open the door of the vehicle. In another second she had jumped out. "How can I ever thank you enough?" she cried. "Those men are scoundrels—they carried me off by force. I was on horseback—it must have been a plot—a diabolical plot to do me a great injury. But you have rescued me from them, I feel safe now."

"Heavens!" he cried, "is it possible that a crime like this could be perpetrated in the heart of England? How lucky it was that I kept my eyes open. It was providential—I felt somehow that I must turn and make inquiries. I had my suspicions, though why I should have had them simply through catching that one glimpse of the interior of the carriage, Heaven only knows. Oh, the rascals! But you are safe now—I give you my word of honour that you are safe with me."

"I am sure of it, sir," said Meg.

"As for these scoundrels—hanging is too good for them!" he cried. "But why on earth should they rush into such an affair—such a crime?"

"That is what I have been asking myself every moment since I fell into their power," said she. "I have no enemies—I have been wondering if they had not made a mistake."

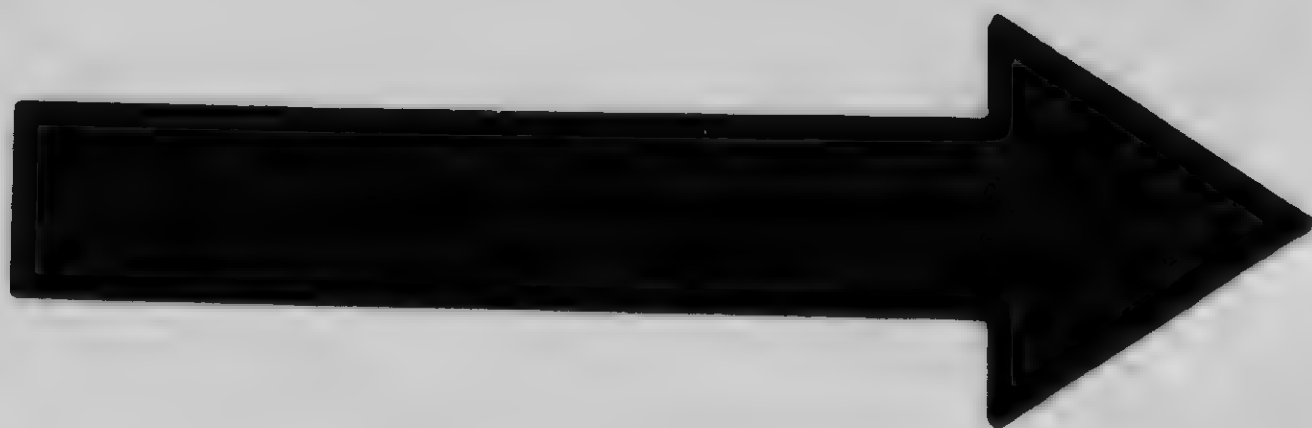
"They have made the greatest mistake of their lives," said he. "The only question is what is best to do for you in the circumstances, Miss—Miss—I am afraid that I have not yet heard your name."

"Athol—my name is Margaret Athol," said she.

He had been gradually backing his horse away from the carriage and the group of men standing by it. He evidently meant that their conversation should not reach them. Then he bent from his saddle, saying—

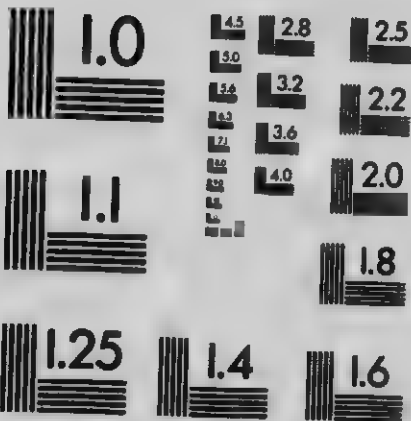
"I have been thinking that perhaps—well, the great thing is that you are saved, is it not? To give publicity to an affair such as this may be a duty, but I know all that it entails. You may have no particular wish to appear at court after court to prosecute these scoundrels—I know that every lady must feel the greatest repugnance about doing so, but if you are prepared to prosecute them, Miss Athol, you have but to say the word. I am ready to tackle the lot of them, though, to let you into a secret, my revolver is not loaded in a single barrel. I only bought it to-day because I forgot to bring my own from London, and I do not like to be without one. But these rascals do not know this, and I feel that I can bluff my way through them all."

"Please do not think of such a thing," she said in a whisper. "You are quite right in believing that I would shun the publicity of such an affair. On no account would I appear against them. Think of the columns that the newspapers would print if the thing came to their ears! Think of the photographs! Oh, we must let them go."



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"It goes greatly against my grain to do so," said he, "but I fear there is nothing else for it. I know the way that people would talk. They are always ready to take the most uncharitable view of any affair in which a lady is concerned. Stay here, Miss Athol; I shall do my best to make these fellows confess whose tools they are. If we find out the instigator of the plot, that may be enough for our purpose. It is as well that you should be forewarned in order to be forearmed."

"Do not mind them; they are four to one," she said.

"If they were fifty to one I should not mind," he cried resolutely. "I have faced greater odds in the course of my life. My blood boils when I think of their outrage!"

He sent his horse forward until he was beside the group. The men scattered at his approach, they appeared to have been taking counsel together as to what they should do, if they should do anything.

"Look here, I want a word with you and I mean to have it," Meg heard him say. "If you give me the name of the man who induced you to run your necks into the hangman's noose I shall let you go now; but if you refuse, I'll see the whole black gang of you hanged after the next assizes. Now take your choice. If any man of you shows signs of foul play I promise him a bullet through his head. Take your choice, and be quick about it."

"Why shouldn't we tell?" Meg heard one of the men say. "The foreigner is nothing to us."

That was all that she heard. The remainder of the parley between her rescuer and the men was, with the exception of a word or two, inaudible to her. It became plain to her, however, that the men were only too glad to come to terms with the gentleman who was interrogating them in a searching way that was not to be resisted by such as they. At last she heard him say—

"That will do so far as I am concerned; but mind, I made no promise in respect to the young lady and her people. If they make up their minds to set the police on your tracks you may be sure you'll be run down sooner or later. In any case you are a foul crew to do the dirty work of a foreigner."

A laugh came from one of the men; but the others plainly felt that the situation was not one for levity. Two of them mounted the box of the vehicle and two went inside, and the horses were started.

The man on the horse rode back to Miss Athol.

"They are a paltry crew, Miss Athol," he said. "The one who seems to be the leader confessed that they had been paid by an Italian nobleman to effect your abduction—his name is the Barone del—now what was the name they told me?—Barone del——"

"The Barone del Greppo?" she suggested.

"That is the name. Is it possible that you are acquainted with the man?"

"I know the Barone del Greppo, but I cannot

believe it possible that he—oh, he belongs to one of the best families in Rome. He was attached to the Italian Embassy."

"I am afraid that you take too charitable a view of all your friends, Miss Athol. I do not suppose that any of those fellows who have just gone off could invent the name of the Barone del Greppo; but of course, if you are sure, there is an end of the business. We need talk no further on this point; what we have to think about is the best way for you to get back to your friends. Their anxiety about you is bound to be great. By the way, may I ask if you are any relation to Sir Drummond Athol?"

"I am his daughter," replied Meg.

He appeared to be greatly surprised.

"Do you know my father? Perhaps you have gone through a campaign with him. You are in the Service?" she said.

"I cannot claim to have ever met Sir Drummond, and I was never in the army; but I have—that is, I mean, he has always been my ideal leader," said he. "It is now my turn to tell you my name; it is unfortunately not one that you have ever heard of, I am quite an obscure person. You cannot possibly have heard the name of Hubert Lotha."

"I do not recollect ever hearing that name," said she. "But you may be sure that I am not likely to forget it after the events of this evening. I hope you will let me present you to my father, Mr. Lotha."



"I would regard it as the greatest honour of my life," he cried enthusiastically, "only—oh, Sir Drummond will know the exact value of what I have done, he is not like other people, Miss Athol. When I ventured to suggest just now that you would perhaps shrink from publicity I interpreted your feeling in this matter from what I knew my own would be. No position could be more repulsive to me than that of a popular hero. I know perfectly well how people would talk over my simple act, magnifying it ridiculously until I should wish myself at the bottom of the sea rather than on the pedestal where I should be placed by the reader of newspapers. But your father—Sir Drummond Athol—he is not a man who would be likely to cause me embarrassment. He will know that I only did what any other man would do in the same circumstances. Don't let us talk any more about this marvellous achievement of mine, if you please, Miss Athol. What we have to consider is how you are to get to your home."

He had dismounted from his horse, and was strolling along by her side, with his arm through the reins.

Then she told him whereabouts Belfield Manor was situated. She had some difficulty in making him understand its position, for he confessed to being a stranger to that part of the moors. He was staying at Glanton, he said, and being very fond of riding he had hired his horse for a week and spent almost every day on the moors, but never in the direction of the Manor.

"The place must be twelve or thirteen miles away," he said.

"It must be fully so far," she replied.

"And the nearest village from here must be Salbars," he said. "Would it be possible to get a vehicle there to carry you to Belfield to-night, do you think?"

"I think it is likely that the landlord of the inn has a pony-cart or perhaps a dog-cart," said she.

"Good! We shall try for Salbars, and hope for the best," he cried cheerily. "It cannot be more than three or four miles from here, allowing that we are now a mile from where this wretched track turns off the highway." Suddenly he stopped, saying, "Heavens above! you have had nothing to eat since you fell into the hands of those rascals? The Barone is not gifted with the virtue of hospitality."

"You must not assume that the Barone was at the bottom of the business," said she.

"I beg your pardon," he cried apologetically.

"Never mind, through the fault of some one, whether English or Italian, you are starving at this minute."

"I admit so much," she said, with a laugh.

"Another stroke of luck for me—oh, decidedly I am in luck's way just now."

He put his hand into the pocket of his jacket, and drew forth a small silver sandwich case.

"I could not account for my not feeling in the least hungry all the afternoon, and when I found

myself at the Moor's Head two hours ago, I had a sound and serviceable tea. That is how I come to have an untouched sandwich case, Miss Athol. What luck!"

"Yes, I have been saying 'What luck for me!' ever since I saw you, Mr. Lotha," said Meg, accepting the case from his hands when he had opened it. She found that it contained the most delicious sandwiches she had ever tasted. Mr. Lotha laughed when she said as much, telling her that probably she had never eaten sandwiches under similar conditions.

When she had emptied the case, insisting on his taking one of the contents, much against his will, they set out for their long walk to the village of Salbars, where there was an inn with, perhaps, a pony in the stable. The night had come on by this time, a clear, starlit night it was just now, for the moon, being past its full, was not due to rise for another hour. Mr. Lotha wished her to take a seat in the saddle of his horse, offering to lead the animal with the greatest caution, but she affirmed that she was not in the least tired. If necessary she could walk the full distance to the Manor, and indeed she proved the truth of her assertion, for so rapidly did she walk that he, leading his horse, could scarcely keep up with her; and so with only one mistake in the topography of the country—one which was easily rectified—they arrived at the little village inn.

Before entering the inn, Mr. Lotha suggested to her the advisability of having a plausible story

ready for the landlord, who might never have had such an experience as that of a strange lady and a man arriving together with only one horse between them. Doubtless in the old days, he said, the inn might have witnessed one horse serving for two people by the aid of a pillion; but the present-day landlord might be disposed to make some inquiry before lending his vehicle, if he had one, and it might be as well to be prepared.

It was clear that she was not used to inventing stories to meet an emergency; she found that the effort was beyond her powers. It was left for this man of resource to suggest one.

"We need not depart from the truth by a hair's-breadth," said he.

"But if we say anything about my being carried off, the story will be over the moors before to-morrow night," she said.

"There is no need for us to say anything about that part of the entertainment," said he. "Here you are in a riding-habit but without a horse with a side saddle. Well, all that you need say is that you dismounted from your horse, and that it took fright and galloped off across the moors in the direction of its stable. Is not that perfectly true?"

She saw at once upon what simple principle of accuracy a deceptive story can be founded, but she left the telling of this particular one to her companion. He made very light of it when they entered the inn, laughing with the landlord over the mishap, and offering a reward of a sovereign to any one who might capture the horse on the

moors, assuming that it had not found its way back to the stables at Belfield Manor.

At the mention of Belfield Manor the landlord became very polite—as polite as the sturdy independence of the Yorkshireman allowed himself to be. He trotted about the kitchen, shouting to the old woman who was his housekeeper, to provide the lady and gentleman with something in the way of supper while the boy was rousing the pony, and putting it into the spring cart—which was the only vehicle that he had—a spring cart; but it was light and well adapted for moorland travelling.

The supper that the lady and gentleman found before them was not a very *recherché* meal; but it was not the less welcome to both of them. The lady was in good spirits, as she had every reason to be, considering how her luck had changed since she had been driven past this inn a couple of hours earlier; the only misgiving that she had now and again being on account of her aunt. She could not help wondering what her aunt would think in regard to her absence, and she feared that Mrs. Egremont would be inclined to make a prodigious fuss over the incident. Her companion did his best to reassure her on this point; he was delightfully cheerful throughout, and made very pleasant fun over the cold ham which was laid before them. But the moment that the landlord mentioned that the spring cart was ready for the journey, he rose from the table.

"We must not lose a minute," he said.

Telling the landlord to see that the horse was

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well looked after, he put the pony in motion, Miss Athol being on the seat beside him in the strange vehicle.

The pony scampered up the slight hill, and at the summit a fine glimpse was offered the travellers of the moon rising across the broad moorland.

"Listen to me, Miss Athol," said he; "do not be frightened when I tell you that you are now in worse hands than you were in when I found you. I am running away with you now, and I promise you that you will not get rid of me so easily as you got rid of the others."

## CHAPTER VIII

FOR a moment after Meg heard from the lips of the man, whom she had met for the first time under somewhat romantic circumstances about three hours before, that he meant to run away with her, she was startled. Then, of course, she perceived that he meant his threat as a jest, and she laughed. He joined in her laughter, and then they both became silent.

She wondered what he was thinking about, and he wondered what exactly was in her thoughts. It would have been rather strange if either of them had done otherwise. They had been participators in an episode, which most people would term romantic, and such episodes make a strong appeal to the imagination of young people—quite as often, too, to the imagination of old people. The elements of this episode were just the elements of some of the most enduring of all romances. There was the lovely lady carried off by the horrid monster, and rescued at exactly the right moment by a young and handsome hero—he was usually on horseback.

There was the story up to the moment of their leaving the little inn; and certainly Meg would have been quite unlike the majority of young women if her imagination had not suggested to her

an appropriate ending to an incident that had so auspicious a beginning. Whether she saw the fitting conclusion with the same clearness of vision as that with which the young man was blessed is quite another matter. But would she have gone so far as to deny that the man beside her had a very good chance of playing to the end the part assigned by tradition to the hero of such a story of beauty in distress rescued by timely bravery?

The chief feeling of which Miss Athol was conscious in regard to her rescuer was one of gratitude. He had saved her from she knew not what horror, and, in addition, he had shown her that he had appreciated her position by refraining from following up the advantage that could not but accrue to himself if his act on her behalf were made public. She was even more impressed by this self-sacrifice on his part than by his bravery. If he had so desired he might have run a very good chance of placing himself in the position of being acclaimed by the whole of England as a hero. She was well aware of this. She was well aware that the story had only to appear in the newspapers, and he would be made the hero of the hour.

And yet he had been considerate enough to throw away quite deliberately such a chance as few men, however modest they might be, could resist accepting; and he had done so because he appreciated her distaste for notoriety. He had done it because he knew that his name could not become public property without hers having given to it that publicity from which he had been thoughtful enough to



believe she would shrink. She felt that he had behaved quite nobly, and she had every reason to feel grateful to him.

And all the time that he was driving that pony along the way to Belfield Manor he never made a reference to his achievement. He never so much as hinted at the possibility that there might be a happy conclusion to the romantic episode in which he had played so prominent a part. He talked to her about her father, and once more expressed the admiration which he said he had always felt for that brave soldier; and again he hoped that some day he might have the privilege of meeting Sir Drummond.

"Of course you must meet my father, Mr. Lotha," she said. "He would never forgive me if I did not see that—that—that he was afforded an opportunity of thanking you face to face for——"

"Oh, please do not say anything more about that," he cried.

"But I must say something more about it," she said. "The more I think over your bravery and—and tact on my behalf the more noble——"

"Now, now, my dear young lady, do not compel me to jump off this machine and disappear for ever among the wilds," he cried. "Of course I do not desire to underrate the importance of what I was lucky enough to accomplish; to make light of it would be to suggest that you were not worth the very trifling risk that I ran, whereas I feel that you—you—oh, well, there is no use in my making the

attempt to say just how fortunate I consider myself, but, at the same time, I do not flatter myself that I did anything more than what hundreds of other men would have done had they been in my place. So, please, do not overwhelm me with thanks which I feel I have not earned."

"Very well, Mr. Lotha, I will say no more on the subject; but you may be sure that I shall never forget that I owe my life to you."

"If now and again you remember that we have driven side by side across these moors, and looked together at that rising moon, I shall be quite satisfied," said he, and, saying it, he looked, not at the rising moon, but at her face.

"You may rest certain that I shall never forget it," she said.

And as she spoke the lights in the upper windows of the house for which they were bound became visible. Meg pointed them out to him, and she was strangely affected on seeing them once more.

"My poor aunt!" she murmured; "I wonder what she thought when I failed to return in time for tea or in time for dinner either."

"We shall soon know," said he.

They knew before they had passed the gate lodge to the Manor, for at the entrance the wife of the lodge-keeper met the vehicle with many expressions of wonder and delight.

"Thank God—thank God that you've been brought back to us safe and sound, Miss Meg," the woman cried. "Oh, miss, such a fright as

we've had! Ever since Bobby Johnston brought back the mare, and told his cock-and-bull story of how you had been carried off by men in a carriage, we have been scouring the moors in search of you. Three search parties are out at this very minute, miss, my husband among them."

"Where did Bobby Johnston find Bluebell? I'll give him a sovereign to-morrow," cried Miss Athol. "And so he told a story of my being carried off by men in a carriage! Is it possible that you believed him?"

"Her ladyship did, and so did some of the hands," replied the woman; "but I know what boys is, and so I says to Peter——"

But what the good woman said to her husband, whose name was Peter, was not revealed at that moment, for one of the search parties rode up, and there were further exclamations of surprise, in the midst of which Mr. Lotha whipped up the pony, and only checked its gallop opposite the hall door of the Manor house.

Mrs. Egremont met her niece in the hall, and they were in each other's arms before either of them had spoken a word. And what with tears and exclamations of surprise, some minutes had passed before Mr. Lotha had a chance of being presented to Meg's aunt. The lady looked wonderingly at him, and then interrogatively at her niece. She was mystified, and seemed to be wondering where this good-looking man came in in the day's adventure.

Meg, seeing the expression on her face, told her

in a very few words something of what had happened, and while she was so engaged Mr. Lotha busied himself over some part of the harness of the pony. He could hear the expressions of the elder lady—how she abused herself for sending Meg alone across the moors—how she marvelled how it could be possible for such a crime as the abduction of a young lady in broad daylight to be committed—how she hoped that the wretches would be brought to justice—how she hoped, in the next breath, that the whole incident would be kept dark! Mr. Lotha heard all but faintly, and he only gave a start when Mrs. Egremont cried—

"He saved you, and I could kiss him for it—kiss him and hug him, the brave fellow that he is! Oh, Meg, if anything had happened to you how should I ever face your father when he comes in the morning?"

"Is my father coming in the morning?" cried Meg in surprise. "How should he come to know anything of what happened?"

"I sent a telegram to him when the boy arrived here with his story of how he had seen you carried off, and I got a reply from him stating that he was coming without delay. He will travel by the night train, so that we may expect him in time for breakfast."

"Poor Daddy!" said Meg. "He will have his journey for nothing."

"What nonsense!" said her aunt. "His journey for nothing? He will have his journey to find his daughter safe and sound instead of—oh, Meg,

when I think of it all. But who could be at the bottom of this dreadful business? Who?—unless—Meg, it is that Italian who is responsible for it all!”

The girl shook her head, but made no reply.

“If not the Italian who could it be?” said Mrs. Egremont. “Such a proceeding never emanated from Yorkshire—from England. Only in Italy or Sicily are such things possibly now-a-days. Infamous! I should like to get the opinion of a sound jury of Yorkshiremen on this scoundrelly proceeding.”

“That would be impossible,” said Meg laughing. “My dear aunt, we must do everything in our power to prevent the news of the affair from spreading. We must suggest that Bobby made a foolish mistake.”

It was at this point in their conversation that Mr. Lotha returned to the hall.

“I have patched up a bit of the harness that was shaky,” he said, “so there is nothing to delay me now. Good-bye, Miss Athol; I hope to hear that you are nothing the worse for your little adventure.”

“Good gracious!” cried Mrs. Egremont, “you cannot think that we would allow you to jolt your way back to the inn in that machine at such an hour of the night! Don’t think of such a thing. We shall have the precious pony looked after, never fear; but you must certainly sleep here, if only for the sake of meeting Sir Drummond Athol in the morning.”

“You are very kind,” said the man; “but what

I am most anxious to avoid is this meeting with Sir Drummond—sometime later I might hope to have the honour of meeting him, but just now——”

Meg understood what was in his mind at that moment: he was too retiring to have any wish to receive the thanks of her father within the first few hours of recovering his daughter. He shrunk from a possible demonstration. It took her aunt some time, however, to appreciate such modesty: her aunt had a wider knowledge of men. She knew that the retiring ones are the exception. But she would not hear of Mr. Lotha leaving the house that night; and so all unwillingly he allowed himself to be persuaded to occupy a room, one of the men-servants being told off to act as his valet. The precious pony was also housed. It had possibly never fared so well in all its life as when consigned to the stables of the Manor, with a fine feed of oats in front of it.

During the hastily improvised supper, of which Meg, her aunt and their visitor partook, Mr. Lotha had an occasional opportunity of letting the others know something about himself. His father and mother had both died when he was young, he said, and he was left to his own devices.

“I am afraid that I wasted most of my money,” he said, with a laugh. “But considering the amount of experience that I purchased I don’t think that I now regret the expenditure. I was always rather adventurous, and I had many opportunities of gratifying myself in this direction. There is scarcely a country that I have not visited—there is

hardly a wild animal that I have not slaughtered. I dare say you think that I have wasted my time shamefully, Mrs. Egremont, because at the age of thirty-four I am still poor, and with no profession except that of a prospector. I suppose you know what a prospector is?"

"Hasn't it something to do with a prospectus?" Mrs. Egremont asked.

"It usually has a good deal," he replied, with a laugh. "Yes, I must confess that with all my experience I am not good for very much."

"You were good enough to-day for one thing, at any rate, Mr. Lotha," said Mrs. Egremont. "You cannot consider your life up to the present as wasted if it was your experience that caused you to see that all was not right in respect of that carriage on the moors."

"That is precisely what has been in my mind ever since the affair," said he. "I must confess that all the time that I was riding across the moor yesterday I was feeling depressed rather than exhilarated. I was feeling that my life had been something of a failure, and that if I meant to do anything that should be of some service to any one in the world it was about time that I began."

"Well, you have made a beginning, Mr. Lotha," said Mrs. Egremont. "You have done to one family at least the greatest service that a man could do. It would seem as if you were sent by Providence to save us from a terrible affliction. People now-a-days are too apt to treat these things lightly and assume that everything is chance, and that

there is no such thing as the hand of Providence. But the more I see of the world—the more I see of the ways things are brought about the more convinced I am of the truth of Shakespeare when he said, 'There's a Divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.'"

"I am sure that you are right," said he in a low voice. "If I could think of myself as a humble means employed by Providence for doing a good turn to any one I should feel greatly encouraged to think that my life had not been wholly a failure."

That was all that was said on the subject of Meg's adventure at the time; but Mrs. Egremont, as well as Meg herself, was greatly struck by the tone assumed by Hubert Lotha when referring to the part that he had played in the incident. The elder lady had in the course of her life in India and elsewhere met several men, who, like this one, had knocked about the world gaining little beyond experience, and not one of them had failed to become famous when a chance offered of showing the stuff he was made of. She wondered if Mr. Lotha would feel that the turning-point in his career had now come, since he had been so plainly used by Providence for the protection of the best girl in the world against the machination of an unknown and certainly unscrupulous enemy.

The next morning Meg's father arrived at the Manor, accompanied by Mr. Forbes. He was met at the station by Meg herself, and the meeting was not one that should have been witnessed by many people. There had been no opportunity of tele-



graphing to Sir Drummond to set his mind at rest in respect of his daughter, and he consequently spent a very bad night in the train. His daughter was all in all to him, and the thought of her being in the power of some scoundrel overwhelmed him with agony. What his feelings were when he sprang out of the carriage almost into his daughter's arms can well be imagined.

Mr. Forbes did not wait to greet the girl. He was extremely anxious about the two portmanteaux. The station-master found him quite fussy. And then he kept hovering about the bookstall for quite a length of time, first buying one paper and then another, making inquiries as regards the arrival of the London mail, and other trifles. Before he walked up the platform to where the father and daughter were standing, arm in arm, they had got over the first emotion of their meeting.

No one was present when Sir Drummond spoke to the man by whose courage and ability his daughter had been restored to him. Of course, on Meg's return with her father, Hubert Lotha had been in the entrance hall, and at that time Sir Drummond had only grasped his hand and looked into his face without a word. After breakfast, however, the two found themselves together and they remained together for a long time. When at last they appeared on the verandah where Meg, Mr. Forbes, and Mrs. Egremont were sitting, Sir Drummond's hand was resting on the arm of the younger man.

"Mr. Lotha has been good enough to promise

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to pay us a visit at Craig Athol," said Sir Drummond. "He will come with us on Friday."

"I am so glad," said Meg gently.

Her aunt said nothing. But there was a good deal in her smile.

## CHAPTER IX

It was scarcely likely that Sir Drummond would take the same view as his daughter respecting the perpetrators of the outrage upon her. He took it for granted that the disappointed Barone had instigated the affair. The notion of carrying off a young woman by main force could never have occurred to an Englishman, he affirmed, as did every one else; but it was just the sort of scheme that would commend itself to a man who had lived in the land of banditti and hired bravoës, and people of that stamp, who wore long cloaks and slouched hats, and used knives when an Englishman would use his fists.

It was in vain that Meg assured him that she could not believe that her ardent lover, the Barone, had anything to do with the business, her father put aside her judgment on this point as valueless. If the Barone was not at the bottom of the affair who was at the bottom of it? he inquired. Undoubtedly it was the fellow, and he should be made to understand that however such conduct might be regarded in Italy, it would not be tolerated in England.

So said Sir Drummond in the presence of his daughter, and his daughter was so frightened that she went to Mr. Lotha, and begged of him as a

special favour not to make her father acquainted with the confession of the men as regards the Barone, and, of course, Mr. Lotha consented to keep the secret.

But while the old General stormed away against the Italian, and swore that he would teach him a lesson that would last him for the rest of his life, it took him some time making up his mind as to what course of action he should pursue in order to effect his purpose. After some consultation with Mrs. Egremont, he agreed that it would never do to put the matter into the hands of the police. To do so would be to make his daughter the centre of a newspaper sensation, the bare idea of which was very odious to him as well as to his daughter herself. But what was he to do?

In Italy of course the obvious thing to do would be to challenge the aggressor to a duel, but in England duelling, except through the agency of a Court of Law, was accounted criminal. It took Sir Drummond some time to arrive at the conclusion that the most effective step that he could take to punish the Barone would be to pay a visit to the Italian Ambassador, and lay the whole matter before him. He was sure that by this means he could most effectively punish the scoundrel who had attempted to rob him of his daughter. The Ambassador would see that the honour of his country demanded that a man who had behaved so disgracefully should be banished from the Embassy in disgrace, and never reinstated, powerful though his family might be.

Sir Drummond communicated his intention to his friend, Mr. Forbes, and was greatly surprised when the latter demurred, shaking his head, and inquiring if it was so certain that the "Italian body"—Mr. Forbes alluded to the Barone in these terms—should be held accountable for what had happened.

"Heavens, man, how far is your caution going to carry you?" cried Sir Drummond. "If the Italian did not instigate the thing I should like to know who did. Doesn't the whole character of the abduction point in the direction of that fellow? He makes desperate love to Meg in London, follows her up here, and is maddened by her rejection of him. What more characteristic sequel to the story could you imagine than the attempted abduction—remembering, of course, that he's an Italian?"

"And you believe that this Italian body was waiting—maybe that he is waiting still for his hired rascals to bring the young woman to him so that he may compel her to marry him?" said Mr. Forbes.

"That is to put the most favourable construction upon his conduct," said Sir Drummond; "but I am ready to do him the justice to say that he meant to marry her."

"Then isn't it a bit queer that this same gentleman should have left England two days ago on a voyage to South America?" asked Forbes.

"What do you mean?" cried Sir Drummond. "Left England? How do you know that he has started for South America?"

"I have it on the authority of a paragraph in the *Morning Post*—I cut it out yesterday and put it in my pocket-book. Read that, my friend."

He took from between the leaves of his pocket-book a few lines of print stating that the Barone del Greppo, having obtained leave of absence from the Embassy to which he was attached, was among the passengers who left Southampton the previous day by the Royal Mail Steamer *Panama*, for Brazil, where he meant to remain for some months.

Sir Drummond read the paragraph, and handed it back to Forbes.

"What is the meaning of this?" he said.

"It means an alternative sequel to the story of his devotion and disappointment," replied Mr. Forbes.

"What if that announcement was only a blind?" suggested Sir Drummond after a pause.

"That is a good thought; in fact, it was my own thought, and that is why I took the trouble to send a telegram to my office from the railway station, giving instructions to my people to find out at the Italian Embassy if the paragraph is true, and to verify it by referring to the list of passengers by the *Panama* at the office of the Company in Cockspur Street. I await a reply. It will probably be here in the course of an hour or two, making allowance for the time it takes for a telegram to be carried from the nearest office to this lonely place."

"I should not be surprised to hear that the paragraph's a hoax," said Sir Drummond after another pause. "The man that would be capable of con-

triving such a scheme as the kidnapping of a young lady, would be quite equal to making an announcement in a newspaper to put people off the scent of his whereabouts."

"I quite agree with you there, Sir Drummond; but all the same——"

"A telegram for you, sir."

The butler entered with a yellow envelope on a salver.

Mr. Forbes tore it open. It contained a telegram which he read as follows—

"Fully verified embassy and steamer office Man left Southampton Wednesday noon."

"I fancy that settles the matter for the present," said Mr. Forbes.

"It makes the whole affair more mysterious than ever," said Sir Drummond. "It shows that a girl's instinct is of more account in a thing of this sort than the judgment of a man of the world."

"Ay, and it shows how cautious a body should be in coming to a conclusion without sufficient evidence," remarked the solicitor.

"I am bewildered," said Sir Drummond. "If the Barone is guiltless of the crime, who is the guilty one?"

"That is what has yet to be found out. Of course we could soon get at the bottom of the affair if we were to put the machinery of the law in motion. I suppose that even in these desolate parts a carriage with a pair of horses is no uncommon object, but there are the men to account for, and a variety of details."

"There is nothing to be gained by a capitulation of the evidence that we could put before Sherlock Holmes if we had him here to investigate the matter for us; but we must avoid publicity at all hazards. I only hope that a report of the matter will not get into some enterprising newspaper, as it is."

"The sooner we all get back to Craig Athol, the better it will be for you and your plans, Sir Drummond. I hear that this Mr. Lotha is to be one of the party."

"It is the least that we can do for him. He showed himself to be a man of resource, and a man of prompt action into the bargain. I wonder how many men there are in Yorkshire who would have their suspicions aroused on so slender a basis as he found to be enough for his purpose. That is what it means to be a scout, Forbes—to observe the least change from the ordinary, and not to be afraid to draw your own conclusions. He had ridden past the carriage in the twilight, and Meg had made no sign to him, and yet he was after them like a shot!"

"Ay, a deal faster than a shot from his revolver, seeing that it was unloaded," said Forbes.

"That is where the comedy element comes in—there always is a comedy element in matters of this sort."

"So I've heard, Sir Drummond. But while matters of this sort are proceeding this same comedy element is not always visible. It is only when a body begins to think over the whole business, after one has gone clear away from it, that the comic flashes occur to one. Well, do you mean



to trust to luck to reveal who it is that was responsible for the outrage upon your daughter's liberty?"

"The truth is, that I am so taken aback by the news contained in that paragraph cut from the *Post* I have not had the time to turn my thoughts—my speculations into another channel. I assumed from the first, as you know, that it was the Italian who had organized the scheme to carry off the girl. Good Lord! What is any one to think, Forbes? I had no notion that we had enemies."

"There's no enemy so bitter as one that has once been a particular friend, Sir Drummond."

"Do you mean that—I must confess that I don't quite grasp your meaning, Forbes."

"I am wondering if Miss Meg had any suitors besides this Italian body."

"I have never heard of any, and I think that I may assume that if she had been approached by any one she would have let me know. Meg and I have always been on the friendliest terms. She has never waited for me to find anything out for myself, she has almost confessed to me—that is, of course, in the case of any man showing her unusual attention."

"She has received a pretty fair amount of what we may call usual attentions—eh, Sir Drummond?"

"Well, you see, she is my only child, and during the past few years she has been regarded as an heiress—not like some of the American ones, of course, with a million or so to their credit—the sort of heiress who will think of nothing in the matri-

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monial market with a humbler title than a Duke; but still a decently endowed Scottish lassie, with a Highland Castle, and a few other desirable things."

"True, true. There's a market even for Highland Castles in these days, when so many good folk find considerable difficulty in starting their sons on a definite career. Still you haven't heard from the lassie herself that any young man—ay, or old man, for the old men are very much to the front in the matrimonial market in these days—had displayed a marked tendency to—to—a proposal?"

"The Italian was the only one she was afraid of during the past season. But——"

"But——"

"I'm not sure that it's quite fair to Meg to say that I've observed the bearing of one special young man—not so very young either—he looks a year or two over thirty."

"A boy—a mere boy, Sir Drummond."

"His name is Castle, Rex Castle—he has lived in India nearly all his life, and I suppose it was there that Keith fell in with him. Anyhow he was introduced to us by the Keiths."

"Which Keiths—your neighbours of Inchgarry, or the Macallister Keiths?"

"The Inchgarry people. Well, I had a notion upon more than one occasion, that I saw this man looking at Meg in a way that suggested——"

Sir Drummond paused. He had not found the exact word that he required.

"Eh? Suggested——"

"Well, let me say, suggested that he was greatly interested in her. You know there are looks and looks. Some are idiotic—that is mostly the look on the face of a calf lover—but others tell a good deal."

"And Mr. Castle's told you a good deal?"

"It was the look of a man who is in earnest, and who knows his own mind."

"Most of them have no minds to know."

"This man is not one of them. I took to him from the first, and asked him to dine with us one night when we had only half-a-dozen people with us."

"And what did Miss Meg say when you suggested asking him to dinner? Did you watch her too?"

"I had no need; she said the moment I mentioned his name, 'I'm glad that you think we might have Mr. Castle, I like him.' But that didn't mean anything, of course."

"Of course not, beyond telling you that she liked the man."

"Quite so. You'll begin to think that I might as well have mentioned the name of any of the dozen or two of men whom Meg likes in an ordinary way—good dancers and excellent polo players; but I assure you that I noticed that look come into his eyes when he glanced at Meg across the table—that look which gave me warning to be prepared for anything."

"You make me interested in the man, too. Is

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there any chance of my getting within touch of him? I should like as well as you to observe him."

"He has been with the Keiths at Inchgarry for a week past. If you return with us to Craig Athol you will have a chance of seeing him every day."

Mr. Forbes shook his head, the action suggesting that he was doubtful if the attraction held out by Sir Drummond was sufficiently great to carry him back to the Highlands when he had business further south.

He shook his head, and then said—

"By the way, how did we come to get into talk about this Mr. Castle, Sir Drummond?"

"Goodness knows," replied Sir Drummond. "Oh, yes, I recollect now. You were asking me about certain suitors—you had an idea that in order to solve the mystery of the kidnapping of Meg it was necessary to find out all there was to be found out regarding Meg's admirers. Well, I have done my best to help you in this matter. But it appears to me that I have only made the original mystery more mysterious still."

"You have proved to the satisfaction of any intelligent person, that the scheme was not the outcome of the mad jealousy of any discarded lover, Sir Drummond, and that is so much progress on the way to the discovery of the truth. We'll say no more on the matter just now."

"And you will not be tempted to return with me to Craig Athol? Man, think of the fish that are

waiting for you up there, so eager to hook themselves upon your gut that they are fairly jumping out of the water."

Mr. Forbes' eyes gleamed wonderfully for a man of his years.

"Don't tempt me, my friend—don't tempt me," he said. "My managing clerk is going on his holidays next week, and he has still to coach me in the business that is marked urgent."

"Urgent? Don't tell me, my good fellow, that a lawyer's business is urgent in the month of August," said Sir Drummond. "It would make no difference to the ultimate fate of your business if you were to come to us for a week. As for being coached by your managing clerk you know as well as I do that there's not a detail of your office work that escapes your notice."

"Don't talk to me, tempter. By the Laird o' Cockpen, if I don't run away now that I've the chance I may be undone. Keep your Highlands, man; I wish to heavens I had never seen them."

He hurried out of the room and round to the verandah facing the moor at its most picturesque part. He was half way round to where the chairs were placed before he became aware of the fact that Meg Athol was seated upon one and Hubert Lotha on another. They were talking together as if they had been acquainted all their lives.

He did not continue on his stroll down the verandah. He paused, and glanced at the occupants of the chairs.

"Oh, romance, romance!" he whispered. "An

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hour's romance can do what years of solid friendship strive in vain to accomplish."

But Meg had caught a glimpse of him.

"Come along, Mr. Forbes, and join your voice with mine in singing the glories of the Highlands. Mr. Lotha was in the Highlands how many years ago—fifteen—and although he has been in almost every part of the world in the mean time, he has never had an irresistible impulse to return until the present moment."

"And has he that impulse at the present moment?" asked Mr. Forbes quietly.

"He just allowed himself to be persuaded," said Meg. "And you, Mr. Forbes—you are returning with us also?"

"You will need some one to sing the praises of the Highlands with all the persuasiveness of an operatic tenor before you will prevail with me, my dear. Your father has been doing his best with me for the past half-hour."

"Surely you are too patriotic to require such an amount of persuasion, Mr. Forbes," said Meg. "Why did you take that hurried rush Northward only a few days ago, if you did not mean to stay for a week or two?"

"That was business, Mistress Meg."

"Some stupid business, I'm sure. Was it another rightful heir turning up and wanting to be bought off by a present of a hundred pounds or an annuity of a thousand?"

"It was not even a wrongful heir, my dear, and that class is rather more plentiful than the other."

Mr. Lotha had at the coming of the Family Solicitor been smoking a cigarette, a few moments later he had taken a few steps to the woodwork of the verandah and leant over, with his cigarette between his fingers. Then, as if he assumed that Mr. Forbes and Miss Athol were about to talk about family matters, he strolled away, and went down the steps into the garden.

"Miss Meg," said Mr. Forbes, "who was it that ran away with you yesterday?"

She laughed.

"I did not recognize a single face," she cried.

"I suppose my father has been trying to make you believe that it was the Barone del Greppo."

"I have just been proving to his satisfaction that whoever the person was, the Italian body had nothing to do with the business," said Mr. Forbes.

"You have found that out? I am so glad," cried Meg.

"And what does Mr. Lotha think of it?" asked Mr. Forbes.

"Oh, he thinks—I am not quite sure what he thinks," said Meg. "But I am glad that you have found out that the poor Barone had nothing to do with it. And now if you wish to do me a good turn you will prevent my father from trying to find out who is the guilty person."

"I grudge letting the rascal escape, but that's the best thing that can be done," said Mr. Forbes.

They talked very little further on this subject.

It was a good deal later in the day that Mr. Forbes sat at a big oak desk in the library of the

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Manor. He was plainly working out some problem that necessitated his cutting out certain letters of the alphabet and laying them alongside one another. The letters were LOTH A.

"Let me see," he murmured. "There's no such surname in the directory as Lotha. Let me see if I can arrange the letters so that they make a surname."

He tried TOLAH, then HALTO; the third combination that he made was ATHOL.

He gave a chuckle.

"Found," he muttered. "Found at last !"



## CHAPTER X

MR. FORBES was careful to destroy every trace of evidence that might be used against him by any one who might make an attempt to discover that he had been indulging his leisure in playing a nursery game, and when he had torn up the letters and thrown them away, he remained seated in his chair for a considerable time, evidently lost in thought. The result of his cogitation he embodied in the question, which he murmured more than once—

"Is this the hand of Providence or the interference of the Foul Fiend? Well, we'll see, we'll see in due course."

After some further consideration of whatever he had before him, he got up from his chair, and went in search of Sir Drummond. He found him with Mrs. Egremont in one of the greenhouses. They were having a council as to the best treatment of the "*azalea indica*" for December flowering.

"I have come to tell you that if you'll take me on for another week at Craig Athol I'll go with you to-morrow, Sir Drummond," said he.

"Good!" cried Sir Drummond. "Ah, Forbes, I knew that when you thought further about those fish that I ventured to mention to you, you would

not find your London business so pressing as it seemed an hour ago."

"Oh, ay, I'm a feeble body when there's a prospect of salmon before me," said Mr. Forbes.

"Why, man, that's just the time when you seem at your best," said Sir Drummond. "Whatever you may be in the practices of the law—and I have heard that you have now and again shown a certain aptitude for interpreting a doubtful clause in an old lease—there can be no question that you are sound on the subject of whipping for trout or playing a salmon. Well, we'll see if we cannot make it worth your while to keep us company at Craig Athol. We shall have to give Lotha a lesson on Highland sport."

"Has Mr. Lotha never fished in Scotland?" asked Forbes.

"He has never had the chance, poor fellow!" replied Sir Drummond in a tone of deep commiseration.

"Ay, poor fellow!" said Mr. Forbes.

"He seems to have fished in a good many waters elsewhere," said Mrs. Egremont. "I have been talking with him a good deal since lunch. He has been a good deal about the world."

"Maybe he is thinking of settling down some of these days," said Mr. Forbes dryly.

"You are in hopes that you will be able to pick up an estate for him cheap in the Highlands?" said Sir Drummond.

"I give you my word that's just what was on my mind," said Forbes. And they all laughed, except

Forbes. His was the perfection of Scotch humour, which consists in pretending not to see a joke that is appreciated by every one that has ears to hear.

"You will not find him easy to please," said Sir Drummond. "A chap like him who has hunted big game in Cashmere, in Africa, and South America, will need a better deer forest than we can offer him. And after the tarpon of the Keys of Florida our trout will seem very humble indeed."

"Mr. Lotha has been something of a rolling stone?" said Mr. Forbes. "Has he told you many of his adventures?"

"Oh, he has merely let a word or two drop that told me more than I could get out of him if I had cross-questioned him at length. What some one said about adventures following the adventurous is quite true. Here is this chap who has knocked about the world for years, coming across a pretty fair amount of adventures, I doubt not, and now he comes to England—the last place in the world that one might reasonably expect to find the scene of a romantic episode, and, lo and behold, before he has been here for a month he has an adventure that carries one back at a bound into the seventeenth or eighteenth century, when cases of abduction were of every-day occurrence. Now, a plain unadventurous man will go through a long lifetime without once having such a chance as this fellow has had within a month or two of his return to civilization. Oh, undoubtedly, adventures follow the adventurous, just as trade follows the flag."

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"I would fain hope, being one of the plain bodies that you talk about, Sir Drummond, that the gentleman will not think it necessary to carry his principles with him to the Highlands—at least so long as I am there," said Mr. Forbes.

"Why, man, the Highlands have been the home of adventure for hundreds of years," said Sir Drummond. "We need no adventurous Southron to introduce romance into our glens and lochs. You forget that it was a Scotsman who set all the world talking of the romance of the Highlands. Without Scott, the romance writers of the world would be a century behind."

"I don't mind reading a romantic story now and again; what I object to is being much in the company of people who are given to finding adventures, wherever they may go," said Mr. Forbes. "I never want to be associated with a romance in any shape or form."

"What, not even as instructing counsel for the defendant?" laughed Sir Drummond.

"For neither plaintiff nor defendant," replied the lawyer. "Believe me, romance is the most inconvenient thing to be associated with in a purely business capacity; and I'm right glad that there's not much of it going now-a-days."

They all left for Craig Athol the next day; and in the train Mr. Forbes managed to have a long talk with Hubert Lotha; but whether his object was to convince that gentleman that he should amend his ways and in future decline even to step an inch across the border that separated the

romantic from the commonplace, or to confirm, by hearing of another man's adventures, his own opinion that everything associated with romance was to be shunned, it would be impossible to say; for Mr. Forbes was not very prone to betray the objects that he had in view in adopting any particular course of action. But, however this may be, he was certainly very attentive to Lotha's conversation about himself.

Lotha had shown himself to be a modest man, as men go, and a retiring one into the bargain. Meg had proved him to be so by his act of allowing the men in the carriage to ride off when he could certainly have captured one of them to act as evidence in a court of law of his, Lotha's, bravery. But even the most reticent man has been known to make quite a number of disclosures under the adroit cross-examination of a discreet lawyer. Now, Mr. Forbes had quite a faculty for extracting the information of which he was in search, from even the most unwilling witness, so that before the train had crossed the Border he had learned a great deal of Mr. Lotha's previous life, and he had become quite interested in the result.

By dint of careful conversational treatment, and a gentle leading on from one point to another, Mr. Forbes succeeded in obtaining an admission from Mr. Lotha that he had been in Scotland for longer than the few days which Sir Drummond had mentioned that the young man had named as the limit of his sojourn in that country. He now allowed that he had once been in the Highlands for as long

a period as six months, and had mastered the elements of salmon fishing as well as grouse shooting. Mr. Forbes refrained from putting to him any question regarding the circumstances connected with his stay in Scotland; he reflected that he had plenty of time to spare for any investigations on this subject that he might instigate. He did not believe in forcing the pace in matters of this sort. He thought that he could manage to make arrangements with his London office to allow for his remaining at Craig Athol for at least a fortnight, and he knew that if he were to have no more than half-an-hour's conversation every day with Mr. Lotha he should still be able to obtain from him much instructive information regarding himself and his adventures.

But before saying to him as a witness, "You may go down," only, of course, in a polite series of phrases, Mr. Forbes had gathered that the adventurous young man was not particularly well off, so far as worldly possessions go. In response to his suggestion that there might be a good deal of money made one way or another among the still unexplored regions of the earth, Lotha had said—

"I did a little trading now and again when I found myself in need of funds for some expedition, and I believe I might have become rich—moderately rich, of course, I mean—if I had stuck to business. I was always careless about money, however, and as soon as I made something I immediately spent it."

"Pity it is that you were not born a Scotsman, Mr. Lotha," said Forbes, and, observing attentively the man opposite to him, he noticed that he gave a little start, and then a smile.

"I have often felt that that would have been a distinct advantage to me in many ways," he said. "But I'm afraid that that is a thing which cannot be altered at one's will."

"Oh, one can become naturalized without a great deal of difficulty," suggested the lawyer.

"But can you tell me of any course of naturalization that will change a man's nature, Mr. Forbes?" inquired the other.

"Ay, that's quite another matter," said Forbes. "But I've known of extravagant Scotsmen as I have thrifty Irishmen."

"I can't say that I have ever been extravagant," said Lotha. "I have simply been content with my little of the world's goods, and I have always managed to keep myself from want. I know the value of money, and I've rarely been without it. But I've been fonder of adventure than anything in the saving line; and that is probably why one of these days I shall be a rich man. The fact is, that in the course of prospecting in South Africa I came across a piece of ground which I know to be highly auriferous. I worked a small tract with startling results. I believe that time will show that I was justified in spending my bottom dollar in buying the whole ground. When the country settles down once more I mean to work the reef for all it is worth, and if it doesn't turn out some-

thing wonderful I shall never call myself a prospector again."

"I'm beginning to think that you may have more Scottish blood in your veins than you are aware of," said Mr. Forbes. He saw the young man smile again in the way that he had done before when the same point had been touched on.

Mr. Forbes thought that, after this, he too might indulge in the luxury of a smile, and he did so, a good deal more broadly than his companion.

And while Mr. Forbes was having his little chat with Lotha, Miss Meg was allowing her thoughts to carry her away in many directions. She had not been greatly affected by her adventure. That is to say, she had not developed any tendency towards nervousness; she had slept well and laughed at her aunt's suggestion that she should consult a medical man in order to avert the possibility of a breakdown. Mrs. Egremont seemed to think that a nervous breakdown was the natural sequel to such a trying experience as that which she had undergone. No, the adventure had not affected her health in any way, but it had led her thoughts into certain channels where they had not previously flowed.

She had felt herself swept off her feet, so to speak, by the example which she had had of the bravery of the man who had rescued her from those who had her in their power. She wondered if she had been carried off by them only to be carried off by this gallant stranger. So the beautiful An-



dromeda may have wondered when she found herself freed from the claws of the dragon; and so had probably every young woman who had ever been rescued by a young hero from a great danger.

She had much of the instinct of the primeval woman who was captivated by the bravery of a man and nothing else. Meg had never before known what was meant by bravery—by courage—by resource on the part of a man; but now, having been brought in contact with all of these traits of manhood—having witnessed the sublime disregard of any consequences to himself through his course of action on the part of this man, she felt that she knew what it was to be a man—that she knew how it was that in all the stories that she had ever read of the deliverance of a fair woman out of the hands of her enemies, by the daring of a man, the young woman had rewarded him with her love, and they lived happy ever after. She felt that if, within the first hour of his achievement, her deliverer had claimed the traditional reward of the brave, who alone deserve the fair, she would not have treated him with scorn. She felt that there should be no limits to her gratitude to Hubert Lotha; and she thought that her father had an impulse in the same direction. If it had not been so, why should he have invited the man to Craig Athol? She was not a girl who had at any time of her life been the slave of her impulses. She had never come home from a ball to lie awake thinking of any of those charming men who had danced more than once with her in a rapturous way. She was, she rather

thought, inclined to be cold. But here was a man who had proved himself to be the bravest of the brave, and she could not deny that her thoughts of him were different from those that other men had inspired in her heart.

Did she love him already? That was the question she asked herself more than once during the previous day, and now it came to her again. But she found herself unable to answer it at a moment's notice. She had never had to ask herself a second time this question in regard to the Barone. She liked the Italian greatly. He was a brilliant man, a good-looking man, and, above all, a gentleman. And yet she had never had a moment's hesitation in determining that the feeling which she had for him was not love.

It was perhaps curious that now, when she began to think of the Barone, she should be led to inquire how it had been possible for the man whom Mr. Lotha had interrogated on the subject, should tell him that it was the Italian who had initiated that diabolical scheme for carrying her off. That was a rather mysterious thing, was it not? She knew that if she had told her father that such a confession had been made to Lotha, the former would, in spite of every evidence to the contrary, have made up his mind that his original idea respecting the outrage was correct. He would ask, as Meg now asked herself, how was it possible that the ruffians who had been hired to carry her off should confess that their employer was the Italian if he was not at the bottom of the plot?

And yet nothing could be more certain than that the Barone had no connection with the plot whatsoever. Mr. Forbes had merely told her that he had been wrongly suspected; but afterwards her father had made her acquainted with the evidence by which that conclusion had been come to; and this evidence was absolutely conclusive. Unless the Barone had spent the last days of his residence in England making arrangements for the perpetration of a crime from which he could not possibly reap any advantage, he was absolutely innocent of any complicity in the vile thing.

And yet Mr. Lotha had forced the confession from the man in the hearing of the others, and had communicated the result to her. She remembered that Mr. Lotha had required to be prompted by her as to the name of the Italian, but this meant nothing except that he had never heard the name before. He certainly did not and could not have known that the Barone del Greppo was a person liable to be suspected of being the instigator of the plot.

Talk of mysteries! Surely this was the greatest of all in connection with a matter which was in itself a mystery. Meg Athol felt that the genius of Sherlock Holmes himself would be paralyzed at the number and the complexity of the problems suggested by the occurrence on which her thoughts were dwelling.

She did her best to turn her thoughts away from this mystery within a mystery—the false confession of one of the criminals, but she did not find it easy

to do so. It was because she failed in her efforts in this direction that she was led, when she found herself beside Mr. Lotha in the dining-car of the train, to put a question to him on the subject.

"Mr. Lotha," she said, "I have been thinking—thinking—something. You do not mind my asking you if you are quite sure that the name which was given you by the man, who you said confessed to you that he was employed by some one, was the Barone del Greppo?"

He smiled, and immediately afterwards became grave.

"I do not think you should dwell any more upon the details of that disagreeable affair, Miss Athol," said he. "I am sure that you would do well to dismiss the whole thing from your mind."

"I quite agree with you," she said, "only I find it difficult to do so. I can only get the incident off my mind when all the questions which keep suggesting themselves to my mind have been answered. When I have nothing more to think about in regard to it my mind will be clear of it, but not till then. I am not an hysterical girl, I can assure you."

"You certainly are not, Miss Athol," he said. "I could scarcely believe that you had gone through that fearful experience so recently. You force me to revise all my previous ideas of womankind. You have shown yourself to be a perfect heroine."

"Oh, scarcely that," she said, with a laugh. "I am no heroine, but at the same time I am not a child to be turned away from my purpose. I only asked you if you were certain that the name men-

tioned by the man was that of the Barone del Greppo. Were you certain, Mr. Lotha?"

"I don't think that I could be mistaken upon so simple a matter," he replied. "Mind, I don't suggest that the Barone del Greppo had anything to do with the outrage. All that I know is that the man whom I supposed to be the leader of the party, said that name in reply to my question. I threatened that if he did not disclose the name of his employer I would have him arrested within an hour; that brought him to his senses, and he at once said, the Barone del Greppo. I stumbled at the name, but you recalled it to me, you remember."

"I recollect it all," she said. "What I have been wondering is, if you could suggest any reason why the man should try to implicate a gentleman who could not possibly have anything to do with the outrage?"

Mr. Lotha shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not good at working out a problem of that sort," he said. "I can't see what the man had to gain. How could a common man like that get hold of the name of the Barone if, as you suggest, the Barone had nothing to do with the business?"

"That is what I have been asking myself. Can you not suggest any answer?"

"The answer that I would suggest is very simple."

"Very simple?"

"Yes; it is that the fellow spoke the truth."

"But it is known that the Barone left England two days previously."

"That might be part of his scheme, Miss Athol, you little know what plotters these Italians are—how deep laid their schemes! I could tell you some stories of them that would open your eyes. But even if the fellow has left the country would it not occur to you that any man wishing to be revenged upon a woman who had scorned him—your father told me how you had been persecuted by this Barone del Greppo—would take very good care to clear off before ordering his accomplices to do his dirty work?"

She shook her head. She was still not convinced that the Italian had anything to do with the episode of her abduction.

They reached Craig Athol that night. Among Sir Drummond's letters was one from his nearest neighbour, Angus Keith, of Inchgarry, saying that he hoped to drop in in time for lunch the next day, and he mentioned that his friend, Mr. Rex Castle, was staying with him, and would probably accompany him.

Mr. Keith came with his friend rather earlier than was expected. The morning was chilly, and Sir Drummond had rung for some logs for the hearth in the great hall, where he and all his party were sitting. The footman brought them, followed by a parlour-maid carrying a copper coal-box with some fire lighters. At that instant the hall door bell jangled, and the footman hastened to admit the visitors.

Mr. Keith and his friend entered, and Sir Drummond was advancing to welcome his guests when

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they were startled by the sound of a crash behind them.

The maid was standing, her eyes fixed on Mr. Castle, the upturned coal-box at her feet.

The maid was Mary Allen.

## CHAPTER XI

OF course the tableau in the hall only lasted for a few moments. The butler had hurried into the hall, hearing the noise of the crash, and the footman was already gathering up the coals. Mary Allen, the impressionable parlour-maid, was half way to the door by which she had entered, covered with confusion.

Every one laughed at the little *contretemps*, but no one made a remark. They all seemed too well accustomed to such evidences of a servant's carelessness to be in the least surprised, except for a moment. Mr. Keith of Inchgarry was already acquainted with Mr. Forbes, but he had to be introduced to Hubert Lotha, and Mr. Rex Castle had to be introduced both to him and to Mr. Forbes. The simple ceremony over, the party were soon deep in talk on the subject of the prospects for the Twelfth, when the moors were to be shot over.

Angus Keith was a man of about thirty-five or forty. His property of Inchgarry was not more than two miles from Craig Athol, so that the two families were near neighbours as well as distant relatives—a General Keith had married an Athol



in the latter years of the eighteenth century. Rex Castle was a tall spare man, whose appearance and complexion suggested an officer who had seen a good deal of active service under a tropical sun. He seemed to be a few years younger than his friend Keith, and there was discernible in his voice a trace of the accent of a North Briton. He had never been in the army, his bronzed complexion being accounted for by the fact of his having been for several years in India. He had been the owner of the renowned tea plantations at Calichar, the sale of which in the early part of the year had been so widely discussed in commercial circles, and, as a consequence, in social circles, for now-a-days commerce enters largely into every circle of society, and there is no such thing as exclusiveness. It was understood that Mr. Rex Castle had returned from his tea plantation with a large fortune, and when it became known after his arrival in England that he was still unmarried, it can easily be believed that his coming was regarded with a considerable amount of interest in the neighbourhood of Mayfair as well as Mincing Lane. He had a few friends in England—mostly soldiers whom he had known in India and who had been glad to accept his hospitality on the hills in the warm seasons, and men who had visited the country in search of big game. Among the latter was Mr. Keith, and he had stayed with Castle for a couple of months two years before, and now he was glad to have an opportunity of being his patron during

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his visit to the Highlands. No one—unless perhaps Angus Keith, who said nothing in public on the subject—had made inquiries regarding Rex Castle's family. People took it for granted that he belonged to the South. Glasgow had given many of her best known sons to reap large fortunes in several parts of India; and some of the most fortunate had been tea planting. It soon became understood that Rex Castle had worked his way up from very small beginnings in an Ayrshire town, until at the age of thirty-four he was the owner of a considerable fortune—not of course the fortune of a Chicago meat packer, but still large enough to make him a person worth considering by mothers who had a daughter or two to dispose of, or by one of the three handsome young widows who were that year very prominent in society.

This was the man who was now seated by the side of Meg Athol, and at whom at least two others in the hall were looking rather attentively, each of them trying to answer the question—

"Is that the man who caused her to refuse the offer made to her by the Italian Barone?"

One of the men trying to find an answer to this question was Mr. Forbes, the other was Hubert Lotha.

They had set themselves rather a difficult task. Rex Castle was not the sort of man who wears his heart upon his sleeve, and Meg Athol was one of those frank girls who are so nice to every one that it is impossible even for their most inti-

mate friends to say if they have a warmer feeling than friendship for any one man.

"Favours to none, she smiles to all extends," was the line which came into Mr. Forbes' mind when he had been watching her in his own quiet way, chatting with Mr. Castle on a settee. It was quite clear that she and Castle were on excellent terms with each other, and that they were resuming the threads of an acquaintance of a very friendly character. Meg had evidently some mutual explanations to make on some trivial society matters familiar to both.

"I had never a chance of telling you why I ran away from the Chepstowe's dance," Mr. Forbes heard him remark. "But perhaps you did not know that I had run away," he added.

"Of course I knew that you ran away, but I thought you told me that you were going on to the Vivians," she replied. "The Vivian's was on the same night, was it not?"

"It was not to the Vivians I went, for the excellent reason that I had not received an invitation," he said. "No, it was rather a queer thing that happened. A man whom I had known in India had got into a scrape—some ridiculous thing that concerned nobody in the world, but he had sent an urgent message to me to go to him."

"How amusing!" she exclaimed.

"It really didn't matter a scrap whether he saw me that night or a week later, but you know how nervous some people are if anything unusual hap-

pens to them. He was one of this sort—the whole thing was a trifle, only I meant to tell you that I was coming on to this neighbourhood sometime in this month."

"There was really no need; Mr. Keith told us all a little later on," said she. "By the way, you have not forgotten your promise, I hope—about the book with the picture done by the monk."

"Of course I have not forgotten it, you would have had it a week ago if the binder had kept his promise. But what can a person do when one is told that a thing must be sent to Italy?"

"You are taking a lot of trouble," she said. "It is very good of you. Really the thing would have done splendidly as I saw it. There was another matter I meant to ask you about."

Mr. Forbes, sitting close to the settee on which Meg and the man were conversing, contrived to overhear so much of their conversation; it was conducted in an ordinary tone, and, of course, any one might have heard every word of it; but Meg lowered her voice slightly when she went on to ask about the other matter, whatever it may have been, and Mr. Forbes had a fear lest he might unwittingly place himself in the position of an eaves-dropper, so he joined himself on to Sir Drummond and Mr. Keith and soon became absorbed in their topic—something about the grouse. He was not, however, so carried away as to be incapable of observing the attention that was being given to Meg and Mr. Castle by Hubert. He could see

without the least trouble that that young man—Mr. Forbes thought of any one under forty as a young man—was extremely interested in the conversation that came from the settee. He was quite intent on every word that passed between Meg and her companion, and Mr. Forbes saw that he was not particularly well pleased at the result of all that he heard and all that he saw. He frowned, and once or twice he bit the ends of his moustache.

As for Mr. Forbes himself, he had set himself to find out the exact terms on which Meg and Mr. Castle stood in regard to each other, and he had quite satisfied himself on this point. He remembered what Sir Drummond had said to him on this subject, and the conclusion to which he had come was that there existed between the pair so excellent an understanding that it was quite possible that in the course of time and under favourable conditions, they might come to think of each other more warmly still. In a place where a number of other people are present a man and a girl who are simply chatting together are not very likely to give themselves away, so to speak. If Meg and Rex had been in love the one with the other, they would not, Mr. Forbes knew, have talked very differently from the way he had heard them; but, at the same time, he knew that if they had been merely ordinary acquaintances they would not have talked in exactly the same tone. In short, he was quite satisfied that each was interested in the other; and if some one had told him that Mr. Castle had come to the High-

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lands in order to have more frequent opportunities of conversing with this girl, he would not have been surprised; although he was ready to admit that he had not yet been fortunate enough to observe any of those signs of the ripening of friendship into love between them to which Sir Drummond had alluded.

And then, Mr. Forbes had an opportunity of observing something which told him how excellent a hostess was his friend Miss Athol, for suddenly she turned her eyes in the direction of Hubert Lotha, and seeing that he was rather detached from the other group in the hall, she made a remark to Mr. Castle and then spoke across a table to Mr. Lotha.

"I was wondering if you had by chance met with Mr. Castle in the course of your Indian journeying," she said, when Hubert came to her.

"I was never for very long in India at one time," said he, "and considering the size of the country it is extremely unlikely that I was ever within a thousand miles of where Mr. Castle was stationed. What part were you in, Mr. Castle?"

"The Darjeeling neighbourhood," said Castle.

"Oh, I never was within a thousand miles of there," said Lotha. "I was chiefly in the southwest—Bombay and about there, and then I went on to Ceylon."

"But Cashmere is not far away from Darjeeling, is it?" said Meg.

"Not so very far away indeed," said Lotha, "but

still farther than from Oxford Street to Piccadilly Circus."

"Had you good sport in Cashmere?" asked Castle.

"Pretty fair; five tigers and the usual mixed bag of bears and buck," replied Lotha.

"You had a good-sized party then," said Castle.

"Five tigers make up rather more than a decent bag."

"There were three of us, and the other two were first-rate shots," said Lotha modestly.

"If you bagged five tigers you may take it from me that there were three first-class shots in your party," said Castle.

Meg thought that this was rather nice on the part of Mr. Castle, and so doubtless did the man who was complimented, though he shook his head and volunteered the confession that if he had not bungled with one of his shots the list of tigers killed would have been increased to six.

"And if none of the others had missed their shots it would probably have been increased to twenty," suggested Meg.

Before Mr. Lotha had a chance of standing up for his friends' marksmanship lunch was announced, and Meg found herself at the foot of the table with Mr. Keith on one side and Mr. Lotha on the other. The conversation at once became general, as it is bound to be when only five people are at a table; afterwards, however, Meg found herself alone with Rex Castle. She had been submitting a new

"Blue Belton" for his judgment in the kennels, and she was surprised to find that he knew so much about sporting dogs. Quite suddenly he asked—

"Who is your friend, Mr. Lotha?"

"He is—Mr. Lotha," she replied, with a laugh. "Did you not believe his tiger story? You would have done so if you knew as much about his courage as I do."

"Heaven forbid that I should doubt any man's story—even a fisherman's," said he. "But five tigers——"

"I have had proof of his courage and his modesty," said she gravely. "He did me the best turn that ever a man did a woman."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Then he may raise the tale of his tigers to a score and I'll believe him," said he.

"Do not jest, please," she said. "I meant to tell you the first time we met what happened a few days ago. It is a more marvellous story than any you have ever heard, even though you may have been the associate of mighty hunters for years. I was staying with my aunt in Yorkshire, as you know, and one evening when I was riding on a lonely moorland road, I was set upon by a band of men, put into a carriage and carried off. They brought me through unfrequented ways, but just as I had given myself up for lost, Mr. Lotha appeared on horseback. He was clever enough to see that something was wrong; and although he had



only an unloaded revolver, he faced the four men and took me away from them. That was how we met—a fortunate meeting for me!”

“Good heavens! How could such a thing happen in England—an abduction?” he cried. He had stood still suddenly while she was speaking, and she could see that he was greatly agitated. “The ruffians!” he continued. “They will be brought to justice, I hope. Did you say that he captured them?”

“He agreed with me that it would be better to let them go rather than face the horrid publicity that would be the result of bringing them to justice.”

“And you mean to say that they all got off—not a blow struck—not a shot fired?”

“It was all for the best. I had no wish to have my name in all the newspapers for a month to be printed out as the girl who figured in the story of the abduction.”

“But what was the motive of those men? It is perfectly plain that they were only the tools of some one else. Surely you must be able to make a guess as to who that person is?”

“I have not the remotest idea. To be sure, there was a name mentioned, but—I think you met the Barone del Greppo in London?”

“I met him, but he—is it possible that you believe he would be guilty of an outrage like this?”

“What is your opinion, Mr. Castle?”

“He is an Italian, to be sure; but that is no reason

for assuming that he is a scoundrel. No, no, whoever suggested to you that he was at the foot of this affair knew nothing of the man. Del Greppo would never have made such an ass of himself as to hope that he should gain anything by such an act. That is the simplest way of looking at it—it leaves the criminal aspect out of the question altogether."

"I agree with you. But in any case the Barone could have had nothing to do with the outrage. He left England two days before it took place."

"Then how did his name come to be mentioned in this connection?"

"My father came to the conclusion that because the nature of the affair was un-English, the Barone was bound to be associated with it."

"That was possibly because he was not intimately acquainted with the man. But surely Mr. Lotha compelled the rascals to say whose accomplices they were—even though you had no intention of proceeding against him, you should have found out who he was, if only for your own protection in the future."

"That is the curious part of the story. I wished to get your opinion in respect of it. I was afraid to tell my father or Mr. Forbes. The fact is, that one of the men confessed to Mr. Lotha that they were in the pay of the Barone."

"Impossible."

"It is true, I can assure you."

Rex Castle's eyes were cast down to the ground;

a frown was upon his face. He was clearly puzzled.

"I do not know what to say or think on the matter," he said. "The whole affair is the most mysterious that ever came to my knowledge, and I have heard of some curious things in the course of my life in India. The idea of carrying off a girl in your position in the very heart of England, hoping to gain something by it—oh, it is beyond belief!"

"I have read in the newspapers o' cases in America—children of millionaires being kidnapped in order to extort a heavy ransom from their relatives, but I am not the daughter of a millionaire."

Mr. Castle remained lost in thought for some minutes while they walked through the grounds in the neighbourhood of the cascade.

"The whole affair is a mystery," he said at last. "Have you learned anything about himself and his family from Mr. Lotha?"

"He told us a good deal," replied Meg. "He has been a great traveller—there is hardly a place in the world that he has not visited. I suppose it was because he lived among such adventures, his very life depending sometimes upon his alertness, he was able to do me so great a service. There really was very little that could be called suspicious about the carriage or the men. We might have been quite an ordinary country party out for the day, and I had given the men who were in the

carriage with me my promise not to signal to any one who might be passing us. They threatened to gag me if I refused to promise—and yet, Mr. Lotha was quick enough and clever enough to perceive that there was something wrong."

"Nothing could be finer than the way he acted throughout," said Mr. Castle. "And with no weapon except an unloaded revolver too! I don't know whether I most admire his courage or his self-restraint. Most men would have tried to obtain some evidence of their heroism by capturing one or more of the men; but because he saw how, in that case, your name would certainly get dragged into the story, he kept himself back!"

"Yes, he behaved extremely well," said Meg. "He was quite ready to face all the men after he had taken me out of their hands. Like you, he did not like the thought of their getting off without some punishment. It was only when I said that on no account would I appear against them that he allowed them to go."

"And then they told him that del Greppo was their employer?"

"Yes; that was what they told him. What I cannot understand is how they got hold of the name of the Barone del Greppo."

"That is another of the many mysteries within the mystery of your being carried off. By the way, I hope that I may be permitted to congratulate Mr. Lotha upon his gallantry. You are not trying to keep the incident a profound secret?"

"I have told no one of it, except you, Mr. Castle. I thought that perhaps you might be able to suggest something in regard to the one who was at the bottom of the plot."

"I am sorry that I have been of no help to you."

"But you have been of use to me, you have confirmed me in my opinion that it was quite impossible that the Barone del Greppo could have anything to do with the matter."

"And that is certainly my honest belief."

Shortly afterwards the visitors took their departure, and Rex had not an opportunity of carrying out his intention of congratulating Hubert Lotha upon his good luck in being able to help Miss Athol to escape out of the hands of her enemies.

Later in the afternoon Mr. Forbes came across the young parlour-maid, Mary Allen, as he was entering the library.

"Mary lass, I'm afraid that you'll no do weel as a parlour-maid," he remarked, shaking his head and increasing his Scottish accent to a confidential extent. "Ye nigh started the life out o' me with that clatter you made with the scuttle."

"I'm sair fashed, sir," said the girl.

"And so you be to be, lass," said he. "But ye'll be waur fashed if ye dinna tell me truly what it was that skeered ye. Come now, no beating aboot the bush. What was it?"

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She took a step towards him and glanced fearfully round, saying in a whisper—

"Mr. Forbes, sir, I haed guid cause to be skeered: the gentleman that steppit into the hall with Mr. Keith was the same one that I saw yon night in this very room speerin' at yon picture."

## CHAPTER XII

MR. FORBES seated himself in the nearest chair, and some seconds had elapsed before he said—

"Ay, ay, that's a queer story ye hae to tell a body, Mary lass."

"Ye may fancy that I'm gone daft, sir," said she, "but it's the truth I'm telling ye, and no lee. I thocht that I would fair hae sunk doon to the corner o' the lum when I looked round and saw him standing there forenenst me—ay, the same as I hope to be savit."

"I wouldna be ower sure, Mary lass," said he. "And above all, I wouldna talk about it. I hope ye didna mak that your excuse for what looked like your clumsiness when the housekeeper rated ye for it."

"I said nought, Mr. Forbes, for I kenned weel that ye would like to hear it first. But she did gie me a bit o' her tongue when the butler told her a' that happed."

"Ye were quite right, Mary, there's naebody must hear ought o' this but mysel'—that is, for the present. But, think a bit, lassie; did ye no tell me that the man that ye cam' upon in this room was a black man?"

"And did ye ever see a white man as black as yon, Mr. Forbes? And that Mr. Castle, as I hear his name is—is he no as swarthy as a real black, sir?"

"Ay, maybe that—maybe that. True, lass, true; I'm no saying that ye hae nae told the truth; the gentleman is as black-a-vised as ony white man can be. D'ye see, he has lived all his life in a hot country, and that plays auld Nick wi' the fairest complexion. Weel, weel, I'll hae to think ower a' that ye hae told me o' this matter; and I'll tak guid care that ye dinna suffer by the telling o't. So far frae being light-headed it seems to me that ye hae the strongest nerves in a' the Castle, to be able to speer at that gentleman—supposing that he was the same—and only let fa' a coal or two. I dinna tell how it was ye stood your feet. Ay, ay; I shouldna wonder if his face did seem a wee bit like auld Nick himsel'; but I mind ye did say that he had guid looks, and that he was no like a black nigger. I'll hae to hae a crack wi' ye again aboot this business, and till then I hope that ye'll keep your tongue frae wagging."

"Ye may trust me, Mr. Forbes; I'm no one o' the claishin' sort. I'll keep my mouth tight shut, you may depend. But what does it all mean, Mr. Forbes? That's what I'd like to ken."

"And so should I, my lass; and ne'er doot but that both of us will learn all there is to learn before long."

He nodded to her and she left the room.

She left a greatly puzzled gentleman in that



room. Mr. Forbes felt that he had done well to yield to Sir Drummond's persuasion and return to Craig Athol. Sir Drummond had promised that he should have many a treat in the way of fishing, but he had not promised that he should be brought face to face with so beautiful a puzzle as he now saw before him. There was nothing that the old lawyer liked better than this getting in touch with a tough problem that demanded for its solution all the talents of which he believed himself to be possessed. He had solved many a tough thing in his time, and now he felt like the war horse that scents the battle from afar. He had, during the week that elapsed since he had entered this room and found Mary lying on the floor, almost forgotten the details of her story of all that had happened in this place—of her hearing the sound within the library, and pushing the door cautiously open and seeing in front of the picture the man standing—of his turning quickly round, revealing a handsome dark face, which frightened her more because it was handsome than because it was black, and then of his vanishing in a flame of fire.

Mr. Forbes had noted at the time these details of the girl's story, but he had had so much to think of in the mean time that he had put them in one of the most distant pigeon-holes of his memory. Now, however, he found occasion to bring them all out again, and lay them on the table before him, as it were, like a hand of cards that had been dealt to him, to enable him to see what sort of a game he should play.

He examined every card, and then he threw them once again on the table—still speaking metaphorically—and began pacing the room with his hands locked behind him and his head bent. He felt that he was in the position of a man who has been set to play a single game of cards, but with two hands dealt to him for the purpose.

"Is it that there is something in the atmosphere of the place that compels a man to give all his attention to the problem that Sir Drummond is ever troubled over?" he muttered. "I came up here a week ago to hear that story of second sight, and although I was able at that time to put it to one side, as I thought, yet I have been ever since doating and dreaming over the whole business—everything that happens seems to my bewitched fancy to have some bearing upon the question of the discovery of the heir. First it is one thing, then it is another, but all have an intimate connection with the catastrophe which keeps Sir Drummond awake o' nights. It's in the air—that's what it is. Sir Drummond has breathed it deep into his system, and I'm on the fair way to do it myself. I had best stop while there is yet time."

He knew that the conclusion to which he had come was a wise one, but it is one thing coming to a wise conclusion in thought, and quite another acting in accordance with its promptings. Mr. Forbes, instead of leaving the Castle, and casting all his cares to the winds that blew over the heather of the mountain, threw himself once more into his chair, and began to think over all the queer things

that had come under his notice during the previous week.

He was interrupted in his cogitations, first by seeing Miss Athol walking past one of the windows with Hubert Lotha by her side, and later by the entrance of his host. The former did not cause him any serious inconvenience. He only looked out at the young people and smiled when they had passed. But in the case of the entering of Sir Drummond, it was different. Sir Drummond proved a serious obstacle in the way of his musings. He had a good deal to say, and he took his own time about it. If a host cannot take his own time about anything that he has to do in his own house, who can?

"Well, my friend," he cried immediately on entering the room. "You saw them together—Castle and Meg, I mean——"

"Oh, yes, I saw them seated on the same settee," replied Mr. Forbes.

"And you noticed—did you pay any particular attention to them?"

"Only an ordinary amount, Sir Drummond. You wouldn't have me play the spy upon an innocent young couple?"

"Certainly not; but I thought that you, with your keen watchfulness, might have noticed——"

"Oh, yes; I certainly noticed that."

"And what was that?"

"Just what you left unsaid. Well, in short, Sir Drummond, all that I noticed was that the pair seem to be on very good terms with each other—

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confidential terms—terms that suggest the parson looking out his place in the Prayer Book, and that place the Solemnization of Matrimony. I wouldn't be too sure, but I rather fancy that Miss Meg and that gentleman have their minds made up."

"That was my belief too, though neither of them said a word to me directly to confirm my impression."

"How could they? The man could only come to you in the old-fashioned way for permission to pay his addresses to your daughter, and Miss Meg could hardly say anything compromising until he had had that interview with you and got your answer."

"That's true enough. But now what has happened?"

"Nothing, except that another good-looking chap, with the air of a first-class hero, leaps into the arena from nowhere in particular and shows a disposition to capture all hearts. Do you fancy that he will capture Miss Meg's?"

"I cannot tell. It wouldn't be like the old story if he didn't. Story-tellers are all agreed that the gallant young knight who saves the beautiful maiden from her cruel enemies must captivate her as well. I can see that Meg feels that she is somehow bound to look on the new-comer with favour. She is carried away by the romantic elements of her adventure, and her heart is overflowing with gratitude."

"A dangerous position for any young woman to find herself in. And what about the young hero—

does he feel that it is necessary for him to play the part to the full as it used to be written out in all the books of our youth?"

"I think there can be no doubt on that point. Unless I am greatly mistaken he is deeply in love with her already."

"Dear me! He's rather quick about it, isn't he?"

"A man like that has learned to be quick in developing great crises. I dare say that he has saved his life now and again by his quickness in using his revolver."

"And your voice—I suppose that, as you are the young woman's father, you may be expected to have a voice in the matter—will it be given in favour of the young hero or the wealthy tea-planter?"

"Forbes, I shall not interfere with my daughter's choice. I shall not make an attempt to influence her one way or another. If she should choose Castle, I will not object to him because he has been connected with trade; and if she should choose the other I will not shake my head if it should turn out that he is penniless. She shall have the man of her choice."

"You are not a worldly father—so much is sure. I don't know that you should be impartial in your judgment on so grave a matter. Surely a father should endeavour to protect his daughter from the effect of such influences as—say, the glamour of romance?"

"I don't see why romance shouldn't have a look

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in now-a-days as well as commonplace prose; it used to play rather a prominent part in the old days, and bring about a happy ending to many a love story; and so, by my faith, my lass shall choose her laddie for herself."

Sir Drummond was certainly giving the representative of romance every chance. He was constantly with Meg for the next day or two. She undertook to show him the best places for trout, and the warmest corner on the mountain for grouse. She rode with him through the glen and played billiards with him in the hall. Of course she did not constitute herself his sole companion; her father was with them sometimes, and occasionally Mr. Forbes; but still the two were left alone several times each day.

But when his visit had lasted nearly a week, Meg had a letter from her mother, telling her to expect her at Craig Athol by the end of the week; and Sir Drummond, if the truth must be told, was very glad that Lady Athol was terminating her round of visits at last; he was not so sure that her ladyship would approve of the way he was playing the part of the impartial father. He had a suspicion that his wife would relieve him of a good deal of his responsibility in respect of Meg, for already he was becoming a little uneasy lest his complacency should not be to the advantage of his daughter. Clearly it was a mother's duty to look after the interests of her child, and as for influencing her judgment—well, Sir Drummond, after due reflection, came to the conclusion that perhaps a mother's influence might

not be greatly out of place when a daughter's happiness was trembling in the balance.

In due course, then, Lady Athol returned to the Castle, and it soon became apparent that she meant to take up the reins of management with a firmer hand than her husband had shown himself to possess. But Mr. Lotha had no reason to complain of any want of cordiality in her bearing towards him. She greeted him most warmly, and when she spoke of the debt of gratitude which all the family owed to him, her voice was full of emotion. She professed herself greatly pleased to see him at Craig Athol. She would not have been happy, she said, if she had not been allowed an opportunity for thanking in person the brave rescuer of her daughter. She hoped that Mr. Lotha was enjoying his visit, and that Meg had shown him all the sights of the neighbourhood.

Hubert Lotha could not have been otherwise than gratified at his reception by Lady Athol; but before she had been home for more than a day he must have become aware of the fact that he would no longer enjoy the solitary companionship of Miss Athol. Lady Athol took very good care that when there was any new part of the mountain or the glen to be explored she was one of the party; and even when there was a game of billiards to be played, she either assumed the duties of marker or was constantly coming into the room in search of something. It soon became clear to him that Meg's mother was not quite so complacent as her father in the discharge of her social duties; and un-

doubtedly it was forced upon him now and again that the mother was a bit of a nuisance.

For that matter so was Mr. Forbes. The family solicitor was for ever getting him into corners, so to speak, putting strange questions to him—some strangely personal questions, not merely with regard to the extent of his income and the sources whence it was derived, but also in respect of his parentage. It seemed that this Mr. Forbes made a fad of surnames and genealogy and foolish things of that sort; and he was consequently for ever on the look-out for something new and puzzling in this line—something that taxed his information and ingenuity to solve. He had never heard of Lotha as a surname, and he wondered if the owner of that name could aid him in tracing it to its source. Where had his family lived—in England or Scotland?—or perhaps they had originally been in Holland. There was a General Botha who had been doing things in the Transvaal—he was supposed to be a descendant of Dutchmen; and if Botha, why not Lotha?

All this Hubert felt to be very boring. If a man has reasons of his own for saying nothing about his family, or even for choosing a name different from that which his father has borne, what business is it of any one else? Mr. Forbes was officious, he felt; it seemed to him that the man was spying upon him—trying to put him into a tight place with his questions and his cross-examinations. To be sure, it would be impossible to say that Mr. Forbes was at any time discourteous, he was only



annoying with his questions, and boring with his insistence. To a young man who has been making satisfactory progress in the wooing of a young woman it is excessively annoying to find himself checked in his advance by a too vigilant mother, and bored to extinction by an officious old gentleman, who insists on keeping by his side asking disagreeable questions just when a chance of having a few moments alone with the young lady has presented itself.

Mr. Lotha had an active mind, and perhaps an ingenious mind as well, and both its activity and ingenuity were taxed to the utmost during the week that followed the arrival of Lady Athol, in his efforts to be brought into closer association with the girl whose gratitude he had earned by an act of signal bravery, and to evade the inquisition of an elderly lawyer whose nature and experience had caused him to be indifferent to all sentimental considerations. He had an idea that Mr. Forbes would not have minded if the girl had been carried off and not restored to her home—in fact, it was quite possible to believe that he would have been pleased if her adventure had not been curtailed, for he would thereby have had many chances of running up bills of costs against Sir Drummond, and that, in the estimation of most people with whom he had come in contact, was all that a lawyer cared about. Mr. Lotha did not profess to be acquainted with the relationship existing between a gentleman in the position of Sir Drummond and his family solicitor, but in assuming that the latter had as his

constant aim the running up of a bill of costs he felt that he was on safe ground. He had a great dislike for lawyers of all sorts. They were always asking or suggesting questions, and sometimes their frankness became not merely inconvenient but absolutely revolting. If there was a secret in Mr. Lotha's life which he did not wish to have divulged what business was that of Mr. Forbes?

On the whole, Hubert Lotha thought that his own ingenuity could not, for the present at least, be more usefully employed than in endeavouring to avoid Mr. Forbes.

He was moderately successful in doing so for some time, but one evening the man contrived to run him down, so to speak. Hubert had been playing billiards with Sir Drummond, and Mr. Forbes was smoking and watching the game in silence. It had scarcely finished, Sir Drummond beating his opponent by eighteen points, before the former was called out of the room on some matter of business, so that Hubert and the lawyer were left together.

"He plays a pretty fair game, Sir Drummond," remarked Mr. Forbes.

"I suppose in justice to myself I am bound to say that he does, since he has beaten me so soundly," replied the young man.

Mr. Forbes gave a queer smile.

"I didn't go so far as to say that he played a better game than you, Mr. Lotha," he said.

"But you might have gone so far—and farther," said Lotha. "He gave me a start of ten last night

and beat me by twelve. As a matter of fact, he has beaten me every day—it's only now and again that I manage to squeeze a game from him."

"Ay, I've remarked that, not without appreciation, and may I say admiration?" said Mr. Forbes, smiling more queerly than ever. "I wonder what Sir Drummond thinks of it."

"I don't suppose he thinks of it at all. Why should he give a moment's thought to it, Mr. Forbes?"

"Ah, why indeed? But he may now and again chuckle over his good luck in being able to beat every other game, and a few over, a player that knows a deal more of billiards than he has ever known or is likely to know."

"Nonsense! Hasn't he——"

"I'm a looker on, Mr. Lotha, only a looker on, but it's the looker on that sees most of the game—ay, of billiards as well as other games, and that's why I say that you are playing your game with great adroitness—your game of billiards I mean, of course—yes, your game of billiards."

The young man looked at the elder very narrowly. He could not for the life of him make out if there was something behind his words—if he meant them to have a secondary meaning, that might tend to divest them of something of their complimentary significance. But Mr. Forbes was not a person to be seen through even when subjected to the narrowest scrutiny of a young man with such eyes as constituted one of the most effective of Hubert Lotha's features.

"Billiards is the only game we play here," said Hubert rather lamely. He had been so long considering the question of a possible double meaning in the old lawyer's words that he failed to pick himself up with any measure of promptness. Somehow this was the way his natural fluency became stagnant in conversation with Mr. Forbes; and a reflection upon this fact caused him to feel some irritation against Mr. Forbes and to look forward to the day when the lawyer should announce his intention of returning to his desk and the compiling of his preposterous bills of costs—Hubert Lotha felt that he was safe in assuming that his bills of costs must be preposterous.

"I've met with more than one first-class billiard player in my time who was ready to affirm that billiards was the only game in existence," said Mr. Forbes. "It's a fine game indubitably, but would you go so far as to say it was the only game that a man might play with advantage to himself, Mr. Lotha?"

"I wouldn't like to say a word against golf in the presence of a Scotchman and in such a house as Craig Athol," said Hubert. He was determined to ignore any double meaning that his fellow guest might intend to convey by his words.

"It's a braw house, Craig Athol, though the handiest links to it are seven miles away!" said Mr. Forbes. "A braw house and a tidy property that'll be inherited by Miss Meg in the fulness of time, provided that no interloper comes between her and it."

"You surely don't believe it possible that—that—I've heard the story of the succession and all that——"

"I believe I said something about it to you myself."

"I believe you did, Mr. Forbes. It's very romantic—like something in Scott, you know; but do you think it possible that, after all these years, the son of the original owner should be in the land of the living?"

"I should much like to have your opinion on this point, Mr.—Mr.—Lotha."

Mr. Forbes had spoken in a low tone and after a long pause, and he made a little significant pause before saying the name Lotha. His eyes were fixed upon the young man's face, and there was now no vestige of a smile upon his own.

Hubert Lotha did not return the scrutiny of the other. On the contrary, his eyes fell as he stood in front of Mr. Forbes. It was in even a lower tone of voice than Mr. Forbes had adopted that he said at last—

"I don't see why you should think my opinion on such a question worth anything, Mr. Forbes."

"Ay, may be that," said the other. "It only occurred to me that—may I inquire how old you are, Mr. Lotha?"

"I'm thirty-five, sir; there's no secret about my age," replied Lotha.

"I thought that that might be about your age, sir, though I must say that a casual observer would put it down at something less; however, I thought

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that you would be about thirty-five or thirty-six, and it so happens that if the heir to Craig Athol was alive to-day he would be thirty-six. That was why I thought I should like to have the opinion of a man of about the same age on the subject of the possibility of the heir being alive and turning up some day in this neighbourhood."

"I see," said Hubert, now looking up and nodding, in appreciation of Mr. Forbes' motive for questioning him. "And now that you've put it to me in that way I hope you will allow me to say that if Douglas Athol is still alive he would be the most contemptible of men if he were to come here and assert his claim to the property. If he had even the smallest share of good taste, leaving every other consideration out of the question altogether, he would live and die a pauper sooner than turn a man like Sir Drummond out of the house which he believes to be his own. Now, sir, you have my views on this subject, whatever they may be worth to you."

"They are the views of a generous man, sir," said Mr. Forbes. "They are the views of a gentleman who might have lived in the unpractical days when chivalry was the guiding spirit of a man's life—in the days when knighthood was in flower. They do you great credit, Mr. Lotha, and I can only hope that should by any chance the heir turn up he will be such a man as you."

Mr. Lotha laughed rather uneasily, saying—

"I think that, should he turn up, you will find him acting like a man, Mr. Forbes; and I think

that you will agree with me in believing that the most manly course he could pursue would be to keep his own secret—not to reveal his identity until——”

“Until?”

“Well, until circumstances make it impossible for him to conceal it any longer.”

“Circumstances? The word is a pretty inclusive one, Mr. Lotha, but perhaps this is the best that could be used under the—the circumstances,” said the lawyer.

And then Sir Drummond returned to the billiard-room, bringing his daughter with him.

Mr. Lotha asked her if she cared to play him a game of fifty up, and Sir Drummond urged her to do so with a view of improving her style.

Mr. Forbes watched the game with a large amount of interest.

He felt glad that he had allowed himself to be persuaded by Sir Drummond to remain at Craig Athol, and he made up his mind to prolong his visit even though his valuable managing clerk in London should be compelled to postpone his holiday.

### CHAPTER XIII

BEYOND any doubt Miss Athol was improving in her play under the instruction of Hubert Lotha, so that her father's prediction was being fulfilled. Hubert was a tactful and an encouraging instructor; and she felt that he was on the whole a better player than her father, though her father was lucky enough to win the greater number of the games played with him. She could see that the younger man understood the science of the game far better than her father had ever done, and she was led by him to look beyond the stroke which she was in the act of playing, and so to "leave something on" for herself when she had made her hazards. With the growth of proficiency there came to her an increased interest in the game, and upon this fact her good father congratulated her, and Mr. Forbes congratulated Hubert.

But Lady Athol became uneasy. She thought it right to caution Meg against the possibility of yielding too much to the fascination of billiards. Lady Athol did not believe that a young girl should ever allow herself to become a really good billiard player. She had ideas of her own as to the length that a girl might go in playing games of skill, and she was once heard in this connection to



make use of the word—it has been obsolete for several years—the word “ladylike.” No one seemed to understand so well as Lady Athol where the line should be drawn between what was ladylike and what was not ladylike—not even Meg herself. As a rule, Meg was quite content to allow her mother to decide for her on this delicate question. Since her adventure on that lonely Yorkshire moor, she was more content than ever to accept the judgment of her mother; for Lady Athol had always discountenanced the long and solitary rides in which Meg had delighted, laughing away her mother’s cautions. Since it had been proved to her by her rather trying experience that Lady Athol’s old-fashioned ideas were well founded, Meg had rather more respect for her judgment; so when she was advised to be content with the proficiency which she had reached at the billiard table, she did not rebel.

Her father, however, not having so sensitive a judgment on all points as his wife, was disposed to reproach her for her want of perseverance, when she excused herself from a suggested game with Mr. Lotha, on a plea of having neglected to write to her aunt or having promised to do something vague for her mother. He hoped that she was not going to become one of those girls who are content to take a second if not a third place in such games as should be played in no half-hearted way.

But Lady Athol expressed to him when they were alone her approval of Meg’s defection so far as the billiard table was concerned.

"She plays quite well enough for a girl," said Lady Athol. "I'm not sure that the atmosphere of a billiard-room is particularly desirable for a young girl."

Sir Drummond held up his hands.

"In the name of Heaven!" he cried, "what notion is this of yours, my dear? One might fancy that you were placing our billiard-room on the level of a London saloon. 'Not particularly desirable.' What's the matter with the atmosphere of our billiard-room? Goodness knows that it's not wanting in ventilation. Those northern windows——"

Lady Drummond smiled; but a moment later became serious—extremely serious.

"Did you mention any time in regard to Mr. Lotha's visit?" she asked.

Her husband showed more astonishment even than before.

"I don't quite know what you mean," he said. "If you inquire whether I specified the length of his visit, as one does now-a-days when the house is full, I can only say that I did nothing of the sort. How could I? Why should I? When a man has just saved one's daughter from the greatest disaster possible to imagine, one does not say, 'Will you come to us from Saturday to Monday?'"

"Of course not, only——"

"Only what, my dear?"

"Well, you see, it is not as if Mr. Lotha was an old friend; he is nice enough in his own way, and——"

"Whatever he may be in his own way, it was certainly pretty lucky for us that he came in *our* way."

Sir Drummond was now speaking very warmly; there was not quite so exuberant a note in his wife's voice as she said—

"Undoubtedly. He has laid us under a debt of gratitude to him that we can never repay. I only wish it was in our power to do something for him—something adequate, I mean. A visit for a fortnight or even a month is really nothing if one has on one's mind any thought of expressing one's gratitude."

"That's perfectly true," said Sir Drummond, "and being perfectly true and reasonable why should you suggest that he has been here long enough? He has not yet been with us a fortnight."

"I wish we knew a little more about him," remarked Lady Athol reflectively, though at that moment she was not looking back; she was looking ahead

"We know something about him—enough to cause us to extend a hearty welcome to him. He is a brave man, and what's better, perhaps, a tactful man. He backed up his rescue of our girl by an act of thoughtfulness on her behalf for which we cannot be too grateful. If he had not been made of the right stuff he would certainly not have done his best to keep the whole adventure dark, lest Meg's name should be in people's

mouths throughout the length and breadth of the land. If he had not been of the right sort he could easily have posed as the hero of the hour."

"Oh, my dear, don't think for a moment that I fail to recognize how admirably he behaved throughout the whole horrid business," cried Lady Drummond. "But—well, I must put it plainly to you: Meg is an impressionable girl, and to say so much is the same as saying that she cannot but be impressed by the—the—what people would call the romantic elements of the affair. There she was, just like the heroine of the old romances, delivered from a cruel fate by a handsome, dashing fellow, and placed in the arms of her father, who, of course, feels that the least he can do is to ask the hero to their ancestral castle."

"Quite so; I can take no exception to the way you put it. Is that all you have to say?"

"That is the whole of the story—up to the present moment, but what reader of romance would be content with the story if it broke off just at this point—just at the point when it was becoming interesting?"

"You suggest——"

"You know perfectly well what I suggest, my dear. You know perfectly well the sort of smile that would come over the face of any one who was made acquainted with the story of poor Meg's adventure. I tell you that that particular smile appeared on each of the four pages of the letter I received from Mabel Egremont yesterday morn-

ing, begging of me to tell her how Mr. Lotha was getting on. Yes, and you might have seen the same smile on the face of Mrs. Keith when she was here two days ago with Mr. Castle."

"And on Mr. Castle's face as well?"

"By no means. It was not a smile of any description that was on the face of Mr. Castle when he looked in at the billiard-room and found Mr. Lotha putting Meg's fingers into the proper position for her to do that difficult screw back off the red. He was not smiling, I can assure you. And I hoped so much when I heard that he was coming for a long visit to the Keiths!"

"And perhaps he had some hopes in the same direction—whatever it was. Well, what does all this talk about smiling and not smiling lead to, my dear lady?"

Sir Drummond was smiling now, but his wife had apparently taken her cue from her observation of Mr. Castle; she was looking grave.

"It leads me to ask myself and to ask of you as well if we are to jeopardize our child's chances of happiness with a man who has made a position for himself in the world and who could provide her with a home equal to her own home, simply because another man of whom we know nothing——"

"Not so fast, my dear, not so fast, if you please. If you are referring to Lotha, let me remind you that we do know something about him."

"What is it, pray? What have you found out

except that he plays a good game of billiards and that he is a presentable man—presentable enough?"

"What I know about him is that his courage—his dash gave us back our child. That is all I know about him and all that I care to know. That knowledge is enough for me—enough to make me think of him with gratitude every hour of my life."

Lady Drummond now gave a little smile.

"You are not a mother," said she. "On the contrary, you are a simple, warm-hearted old soldier—a Highlander into the bargain. I have always had a notion that you had a hankering after romance; but I never thought that you would make a personal matter of such a thing as this. I never thought that you would be ready to sacrifice your daughter's prospects solely that the traditional end of the story should be brought about."

"Now listen to me, guid wife." Sir Drummond had caught her hand when she was in the act of turning away from him with an aggrieved shake of the head. "Listen to me for one moment and you'll hear what are my views on this matter. I rather more than hinted at them when Forbes was beginning to talk a few days ago as you have talked now, only not quite so plainly. I told him then as I tell you now that if it should come to a question of choosing between Castle and Lotha—I don't say that the question will ever arise; but should it arise, I declare that Meg herself will do the choosing. I confess that I did think—not as a result of my own observation, I admit, but on

account of what you have told me from time to time during the summer when we saw a good deal of Castle—that Meg had chosen discreetly. But if it so happens that she has not made her choice already and that she should tell me that she had come to think of Hubert Lotha as we hoped—I allow that I had hoped it—she would think of Castle, all I can say is that I would say, 'Bless you, my children,' in the most approved fashion."

"Of course you would—when we had made inquiries and found out that his family——"

"I wouldn't bother much about his family—I would be satisfied with very little in that way. His connections would need to be very shady indeed before I should take it upon me to shut the door upon him on their account only."

"He has not enlightened us very much on this point up to the present."

"He has never had occasion to do so. His connections may be so distinguished as to make it sound snobbish on his part to drag them in unnecessarily."

"There's surely nothing snobbish in a man's saying who is his father—what family he belongs to. I think it would be safer to assume that he might tell all about them without running a chance of being accused of boasting. Lotha—did you ever hear of a county family named Lotha?"

"I must say that I never did; but that may be because I have a very poor knowledge of English county families; and Lotha is certainly not a Scotch name. But, for that matter, what about

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Castle? He doesn't claim to belong to any of the Castle families that we know of. He was only something in the tea line—would you feel angry if I were to call him a retired grocer?"

"Don't be absurd."

"I don't mean to be. I've said nothing absurd or even inaccurate. Castle is an excellent chap—a first-class chap, and I believe that he got something like a hundred thousand pounds for his tea plantation. He was pretty well received by decent people in London—especially decent people with families of daughters—and the Keiths took him up very heartily, though they have no daughters; but all the same he is socially of no higher rank than that of a retired tea merchant. I don't suppose that Lotha can be greatly inferior to Castle so far as actual family connections are concerned. That's not the point, however, you will say, and you will be right. The point is that Meg shall do her own choosing, and, by George, madam, if it should turn out that Lotha's father was a crossing-sweeper she shall have Lotha if she loves him."

"And I always thought that Highlanders were the proudest people in the world in the matter of family! Never mind. It was a Scotsman, at any rate, who wrote 'A man's a man for a' that,' and his countrymen have been singing 'A Scotsman's a man for a' that' for the past hundred years or so. That's why I thought you might be on the side of Mr. Castle, who was certainly a Scotsman at some time of his life."

Lady Athol was anxious to show her husband



how good-humouredly she was taking his decision, adverse though it was to what she had expected it to be. She was a woman of tact as well as sense, and being a good wife as well as a good mother, she took care never to be otherwise than in a good humour in the presence of her husband, however unreasonable he might be. Where a man has an argument with his wife and her last word is one of good-humour, he believes that he has led her (or forced her) into his way of thinking, and he is consequently very well satisfied with himself and thinks he knows how to manage a wife. When a husband has an acute sense of his skill in managing a wife it may be taken for granted that his wife knows how to manage him.

Sir Drummond, as he patted his wife's hand and told her that she had been an Irishwoman all her life, whether or not Rex Castle had ever been a Scotsman, felt very well satisfied with himself and, incidentally, with her. He felt that she was a very sensible woman, because she had practically come to agree with his way of looking at the matter about which they had been conversing; and he was quite right; she was a very sensible woman; but only because she took care that her final remark had in it a touch of good-humour.

When they separated she became grave. She was sensible enough to perceive that there was greater need than ever for her to exercise some vigilance in the matter of her daughter's billiard lessons. She resolved that whenever there was any instruction or advice on this fascinating game

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to be given to her daughter by Mr. Lotha, she herself would embrace the opportunity of learning anything that the instructor had to communicate.

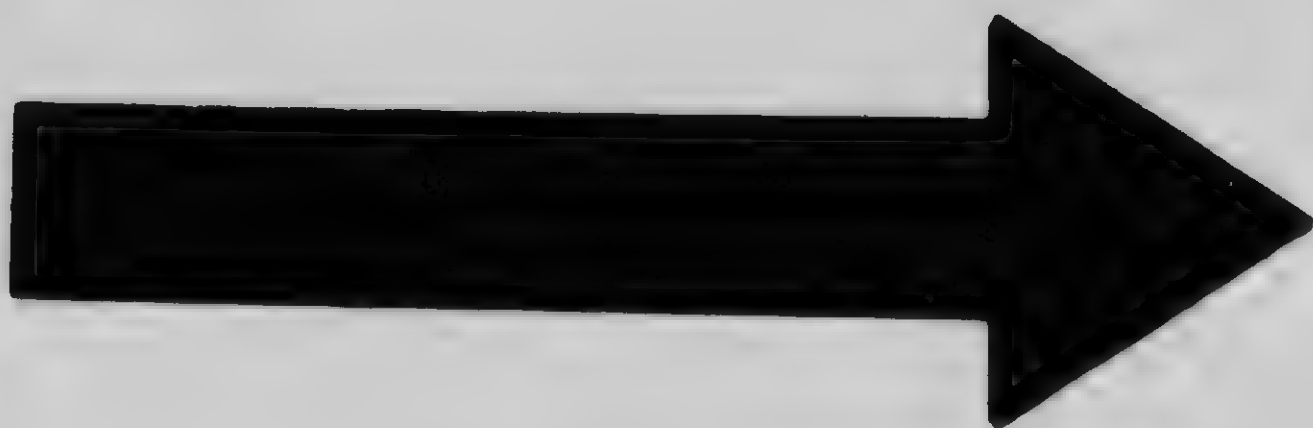
But Mr. Lotha had possibly reasons of his own for thinking that in the matter of billiard instruction there should be a first and a second form, and that things would run much more smoothly if the classes were kept severely apart. He may have had a conscientious feeling that he was not doing himself justice in attempting to impart some instruction to the younger lady when the elder was looking on. He could not have failed to perceive the impossibility of teaching a young woman how to give the requisite swing to her cue when playing a "running through" stroke, without leaning over her; and somehow Mr. Lotha thought it inadvisable to place himself in such a position when Lady Athol was present.

He began to fear that Meg's progress would be seriously interrupted, and to feel that it would have been much more satisfactory if Lady Athol had prolonged her round of visits.

He hoped that Meg shared his feelings in this respect; but he was not quite sure.

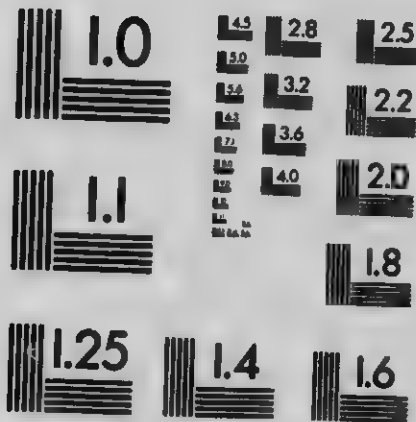
## CHAPTER XIV

BUT however boring to a true lover the unrelaxing vigilance of the young woman's mother may be, infinitely more depressing is the presence of the Other Man. The true lover, if he is not quite sure of the feelings of the girl, is evermore on the look-out for the appearance of another man who he fears may develop into the Other Man. In the humbler forms of animal life the same apprehension prevails, hence the condition of the lover is not a very happy one. He regards every male as a possible rival and flies at his throat on chance. It was the same instinct that caused Hubert Lotha to have his suspicions regarding Rex Castle the moment that the latter appeared in the company of Keith of Inchgarry. He did not fail to notice the friendly relations existing between Meg and Mr. Castle, but he also noticed enough to convince him that no engagement existed between the two. He was not quite sure that, if such an engagement existed, he would be told of it. He could scarcely expect to be treated all at once as such a friend of the family as to be informed on an important matter that concerned the family alone. But he thought himself fully qualified to arrive at a conclusion on



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his own judgment on a question of an engagement or no engagement without the necessity of a hint in any direction from either of the girl's parents; and he did not over estimate his own powers. He could see that there was no engagement between Meg and Castle; but he fancied that he could see that an excellent understanding existed between the two, and he had an impression that if this understanding did not develop into a formal engagement it would not be the man's fault; and the result of his observations on this point caused him some uneasiness.

But, of course, he could not but feel that, so far as this was concerned, he had only himself to blame. If a man is foolish enough to set his heart on winning the hand of a girl whose beauty and whose position in the world, leaving her natural amiability out of the question altogether, cause her to be looked upon as a highly desirable match for any man, he must take the risk. He must run the chance of having a rival or two, and consider himself lucky if he does not find that the girl has already promised to marry at least one of them.

Hubert Lotha had set his heart upon marrying this beautiful and attractive girl, and although he had felt somewhat disheartened when he saw how the girl brightened up at the entrance of Mr. Castle, and when he observed how friendly were the relations that existed between them, yet he soon recovered from the effects of that little set-back. He pulled himself together by reflecting upon the

strength of his own position. What claim Castle might have upon her it could not possibly compete with that which he, Hubert Lotha, could advance on his own behalf. What were the memories of the dances and the theatre parties and the Hurlingham parties, and the river parties which she exchanged with Rex Castle when they were sitting together in the hall, compared with the recollection of the terrible danger in which she had been for some hours until he, Hubert, had come to her rescue? He knew enough about woman to be aware of the fact that in the case of loving a man or not loving him, the element of gratitude to a man for having saved her from a great disaster should never be counted on to lead her to love that man. Indeed, he would have been no true lover had he founded his hopes of getting her to love him on account of the service he had rendered her. What he trusted to was not her sense of justice but her sense of romance; and he felt that with romance on his side he might not, with good luck, fear the rivalry of the girl's pleasant recollections of the past London season which seemed to him to form the basis of much of her conversation with Mr. Castle. Nay, he felt in his most enthusiastic moments that his connection with the romantic episode in Meg's life placed him in a position to ignore the importance of reckoning upon Rex Castle's undoubted wealth in case of any rivalry between him and that man.

But in spite of this appreciation of the strength

of his own position as an aspirant to the hand of Meg Athol, he came to the conclusion after one of Rex Castle's visits—Meg had been out driving with her mother and they had overtaken him on the road and carried him to Craig Athol to lunch—that he would have felt more at his ease if Mr. Castle had carried out the programme which it appeared he had set himself for the autumn and had gone yachting to the fjords of the coast of Norway.

"By the way, Castle," remarked Sir Drummond at lunch, when the topic of yachting had incidentally come up. "By the way, how was it that you came to change your plans about that boat? I fancied that you had your heart set on a Norwegian cruise. Was the right craft not forthcoming, or what?"

Hubert Lotha, with the jealous eyes of a true lover, fancied that he detected Castle flicking a little glance in the direction of Meg, and, what made him feel more uneasy still, Meg's careful avoidance of that glance by looking earnestly down to her plate, while Castle replied rather lamely—

"I'm really not quite sure how I came to throw over the boat; I believe it was Keith's persuasive tongue that had something to do with it. He persuaded me into the belief that I had given him a promise when we met in India to spend my first August after retiring from my work with him in the Highlands. You see he had been talking a lot to me about the attractions of the Highlands,



and I shouldn't wonder if I let myself in for this visit."

"Hallo, hallo!" cried Sir Drummond, with a laugh. "This will not do, you know. I will not sit quietly by and hear you talk of being 'let in' for a visit to this neighbourhood. Your expression savours of disparagement, but you know as well as I do that you have never been in a finer country, East or West."

"I apologize without being called on to do so," said Castle. "If you could understand what I felt on finding myself among your mountains—looking down through the dim glen—hearing the splash of the waterfall and the rippling of the burn, you would know that my heart was in the Highlands."

"Why, you are on your native heath, Castle," said Sir Drummond. "Every one knows that you are a Scot, though you have lost all but the faintest echo of our burr."

"I am becoming more convinced every day that I am a Scot," laughed Castle. "I believe that I am rapidly developing the true accent."

"I've noted that myself, Mr. Castle," remarked Mr. Forbes. "I noted with great satisfaction that you said 'burn' with a proper regard for the 'r' which only a Scotsman can have. I'm in hopes that after a month or two you'll see your way to name it as it should be named—'hurren.'"

Every one laughed at the breadth of Mr. Forbes' rendering of the word with the full rolling of the "r," as if it were not one letter but several—the

drone of a bagpipe was heard through his pronunciation.

"I feel greatly encouraged by your kind commendation," said Rex.

"But Castle is not a Highland name—nor a Lowland name, for that matter," remarked the lawyer reflectively.

"That's rather a pity, isn't it now?" said Castle. "I shouldn't wonder if I was really a Macgregor. But one naturally takes on one's father's name, however inappropriate it may be to one with national aspirations. If I were to call myself Macgregor, I suppose I should have to face the claymores and skenes of the whole clan."

"Did you tell me that it was in Aberdeen you had lived before making India your home, Mr. Castle?" said Forbes confidentially.

"If I did mention Aberdeen, you may be sure that I spoke the truth," replied Castle. "I have heard it said that an Aberdeen man could no more tell a falsehood than an Ayrshire man could speak the truth."

"It was an Aberdeenshire man that said so," laughed Sir Drummond, and forthwith adroitly changed the conversation.

He could perceive that Mr. Castle was beginning to be uneasy under the "fishing" examination of the lawyer. He thought it quite likely that Castle might be a man of somewhat humble origin, and though he might not be ashamed of it, that was no reason why he should be asked to talk about it

under the pressure of Mr. Forbes' cross-examination.

It was Lady Athol who, with a suggestion that the other guest at the table was being ignored in the conversation, said—

"What is your county, Mr. Lotha? There is nothing of the Border in your accent."

"I have lived so long abroad in one place and another, that I don't think I can claim to belong to any county in England," replied Hubert, after a little hesitation.

"It is best to think of oneself as a citizen of the world," said Sir Drummond. "We Highlanders are too much disposed to think Scottishly instead of Imperially."

"I wonder how long it takes one to get into that happy way," said Lady Athol, still addressing Hubert.

"It doesn't take so very long when one has all one's interests abroad," said he.

"But you are not a colonial, are you?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly," he replied. "At least I don't think I am entitled to call myself colonial. But I was very young when we left England—quite a baby, in fact."

"Oh, then you have every right to claim to be regarded as a colonial," said she. "You belong to greater Britain."

"And it is becoming greater every day," remarked Sir Drummond heartily. "Every colony is of importance to-day."

"And which is yours, Mr. Lotha?" inquired Lady Athol.

Again it was only after some hesitation that Mr. Lotha said—

"I suppose I should claim to be Australian; but I have lived at the Cape and elsewhere since then."

"Since when?" asked Mr. Forbes.

"Since I was in Australia," replied Lotha.

"What did you say your colony was?" said Castle. He had been talking to Meg while the others had been interrogating Hubert.

"I have just said it is Australia," replied the latter; and now he spoke rapidly, and with no suspicion of hesitancy.

"But what colony?" said Castle.

Hubert Lotha looked puzzled.

"What colony?" he repeated. "Haven't I said Australia? But I can't say that I ever regarded it as my home. In fact, I think I may claim to be, as Sir Drummond remarked, a citizen of the world."

"It's refreshing to come across some one who talks of Australia as a colony," cried Castle. "You take a larger view of matters than most Australians, Mr. Lotha. I was under the impression that there were four distinct colonies in Australia, and that the greatest rivalry existed between them all."

"Oh, I never bothered myself with politics, and that sort of thing," said Lotha. "In fact, I was too young to do so."

"But I'm sure you were not too young to be impressed with the beauty of Port Jackson," said Castle, with a laugh in which Sir Drummond joined, remarking—

"I would not like to say in the presence of a Sydney sider that there was any lovelier harbour in the world. But perhaps you were not a Sydney side man, Mr. Lotha."

"No, I never was," replied Lotha.

Castle looked at him across the table, with a puzzled expression on his face. It seemed as if he was about to ask a further question, but he refrained from doing so. Meg said something to him, and he gave all his attention to her.

Sir Drummond put Lotha at his ease once more by asking him something about kangaroo hunting, and if there was any rule laid down in the breeding of the kangaroo hound.

But he did not get much information on these kindred subjects. Lotha said that he had found kangaroos poor sport, and he didn't believe that there was any fixed rule for breeding the hounds; some chaps thought one sort the best and others pinned their faith to quite a different mixture.

And then Sir Drummond pushed the cigar-box toward Castle, for the coffee was being served. Castle was so greatly interested in his conversation with Meg that his attention had to be called to the cigars at his elbow.

On the terrace after lunch Mr. Forbes remarked to Sir Drummond, by whose side he stood—

"Your friend, Mr. Lotha, has only got a vague idea of the Australian colonies, I'm afraid."

Sir Drummond smiled.

"What he said shows how easy it is for a man who is engrossed in other matters to know nothing of the constitution of a place—even a little state such as New South Wales or Queensland," was his comment on the strange ignorance so freely displayed by Hubert Lotha on the subject of the Australian colonies. "But he said that he had left Australia early in life—he may not have been of an age to know anything of the place."

"What place?"

"The place in Australia where he had been living. I don't know that he mentioned its name, now that I come to think of it."

"He did not. Perhaps he did not even remember its name. Perhaps he did not wish to remember it."

"Or perhaps he had no mind to give any information to Castle, who had the tone of a cross-examiner. He is under no obligation to reveal the story of his life to strangers."

"None whatever. I think it quite possible that he may be able to give a full and honourable explanation of his reticence in these particulars, Sir Drummond, and I thought that there would be no harm in hinting so much to you."

"Hallo, hallo! What's this? Has he been making you his confidant, Forbes?"

"Not he. But you can understand how greatly I am interested in him after the hint or two you gave me as to the liberality of your views in regard

to him. By the way, I'm not so sure that her ladyship altogether shares these views of yours, Sir Drummond."

Sir Drummond took his head, and lowering his voice, said—

"Between ourselves, my good friend, she does not share my views. She is a strong partisan of Castle, though we owe nothing whatever to him. I gave her to understand, however, that I meant Meg to make her own choice, and I think that I brought her to see the fairness of this."

"Her ladyship is a woman of sense and judgment. But still she is a mother—the mother of one daughter, and a charming daughter, too. I would not let her be prejudiced against this Mr. Lotha, even though he may know nothing about the constitution of the Australian colonies."

"I think we may reckon on her neutrality, after what I said to her, Forbes."

"If I may venture to say so, that is the course which I think she should adopt for the present, at any rate."

"I'm glad that you think so. I'll tell her what you say. Women seldom understand what an attitude of strict neutrality means when they see in the distance a possible wealthy suitor and closer at hand another who does not seem to be equally well endowed."

"Truer words never were spoken, Sir Drummond; that is how so many marriages in which a mother has a voice turn out satisfactory."

Sir Drummond recognized the dry shrewdness of

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the old lawyer's remark. He gave a laugh, saying—

"You rascal! I believe that you are on the side of the money-bags yourself."

"Didn't somebody once say that Heaven was on the side of the big battalions?" he asked.

"A'weel! I'm on the side of Heaven."

"And I'm on the side of love!" cried Sir Drummond.

"There are folks that tell us that the two mean the same, but I hae my doots," said the lawyer.



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## CHAPTER XV

NEVER before this afternoon had Lady Athol shown herself so appreciative of the society of Hubert Lotha. She kept him by her side on the terrace after lunch, and let the others of the party look after themselves. The desire which she showed for the companionship of Mr. Lotha at this time went a long way to proving the accuracy of Sir Drummond's dictum bearing upon the interpretation of the word "neutrality" by a woman. She simply ignored the existence of Rex Castle, and chatted to the other man with such marked cordiality as she had never yet shown to him since her first reception of him when her heart had been full of gratitude for his services to her daughter. She kept him by her side, on one of the sheltered seats of the terrace, talking to him in the liveliest way; and, at the risk of wounding the *amour propre* of Rex Castle, actually turned her back upon him, and paid him no more attention than if he had not existed, although it was she herself who had begged him to come to lunch that day.

In these circumstances it would be impossible to blame Mr. Castle for refusing to submit any longer to so definite a snub, or for his resenting it by

simply walking off the terrace, leaving her to enjoy the society of that Mr. Lotha. since it seemed so fascinating to her.

And that was exactly what Rex Castle did. After lingering for some time smoking his cigar leaning against the stone pier of the balustrade, without having a single remark addressed to him by Lady Athol, he pulled himself together and with an affectation of indifference walked away.

Perhaps the fact of Meg's being by his side prevented him from being actually rude to his neglectful hostess, for it must be admitted that, however strongly provoked he may have been, he kept his temper well under control, and gave no sign of whatever chagrin he may have felt at Lady Athol's marked partiality for the company of another man.

Strange to say it was Mr. Lotha whose face darkened as he watched Castle and Meg strolling away side by side in the direction of the romantic scenery through which the trout stream flowed. He noticed that they were both smiling; and now and again, though they were walking side by side, their faces turned toward each other at the same moment. . . .

He felt that he would just as soon have occupied a humbler place in Lady Athol's regard. If the choice had been offered to him he felt that he would have been quite equal to such an act of self-sacrifice as the relinquishing of the position of the favoured

guest in favour of that of which he did not doubt Castle was taking the fullest advantage.

He could scarcely even pretend to take an interest in his gracious hostess's account of some of the curious incidents in connection with the phenomenon of second sight. She was anxious to know if Mr. Lotha, who had travelled so widely, had any experience of the working of this rather unusual power. She had heard, she said, that the natives of some parts of South America possessed it. It did not demand the exercise of any gift of second sight to convince Lady Athol that the man whom she was honouring by her exclusive attention was not quite so much interested in occult science as she fancied he might have been. He replied to her inquiries in rather a distrait way, and she could see that what he was taking a great interest in at that moment was the progress of Castle and Meg down to the shadowy places of the glen.

Observing how he was affected, Lady Athol congratulated herself upon the decision to which she had come during lunch, that at the risk of wounding the susceptibilities of Rex Castle, she would keep this Mr. Lotha by her side long enough to allow of Meg's making the former acquainted with most likely trout pools in the glen. Her observation of Mr. Lotha's attitude caused her to congratulate herself also upon the course she had adopted in regard to the billiard lessons.

She was a good mother and a good wife, and she acted according to her lights in the double capacity.

She knew that Rex Castle was an extremely nice man and a wealthy man into the bargain—sometimes the two are found in combination. She had an idea that he had been attracted to Meg during the three months they had spent in London, and that Meg had a certain liking for him. With all this eligibility pointing in the direction of future happiness, she thought that it would be a great pity if any of the uncertainties connected with a romantic adventure should be encouraged to develop and imperil the satisfactory future which she foresaw for her child. She had not the same appreciation as her husband of the extent of the demands of gratitude, and she had not the practical imagination of Mr. Forbes to enable her to perceive the possibility of Mr. Lotha turning out even more eligible a suitor than the other man. In the circumstances she could only act according to her lights, and she saw no reason to feel any especial remorse at having adopted the course which had suggested itself to her, even though Meg and Mr. Castle took a remarkably long time to explore the glen, and her attentions to Mr. Lotha were beginning to flag, so that she was greatly relieved when Sir Drummond and Mr. Forbes came round to her side of the terrace. She took very good care that they relieved her of the necessity of providing topics of conversation with so abstracted a guest.

An hour had passed before Mr. Castle and Meg reappeared on the glen path. Rex showed himself to be more enthusiastic on the prospects of the

fishings than he had yet been. Surely there was no better trout stream in the Highlands! And the scenery of the glen—he had been twice in the midst of it since he had come northward with the Keiths, but until this afternoon he had somehow not appreciated it as it deserved. Whatever people might say about the beauty of the Norwegian fjords, he was sure that it could never come up to that of “one of our Highland glens.”

Those were his words, and Sir Drummond pounced upon his use of his “our.”

“Then you do look on yourself as a Highlander?” he cried. “You are not merely one of those aliens who come from South Africa or some other place of the same stamp and buy a forest, put on the kilts—when they have been taught how—and call themselves Highlanders.”

“I thought that we settled that point at lunch,” said Rex. “I admitted frankly—proudly—that I was Highland.”

“You only said that your heart was in the Highlands,” suggested Lady Athol.

“As for that—well, if I said so in the enthusiasm of the moment I say the same now after due reflection,” replied Castle.

“If there was any doubt about it that speech would settle the matter,” cried Sir Drummond. “The man who talks about his heart after due reflection is certainly a Scotsman.”

“I’ll call Miss Athol as a witness that I never once referred to the burn under any other name.

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Did I even suggest that it was a stream, Miss Athol?" said Rex, turning to Meg.

She laughed, saying—

"You never did; moreover, you once referred to the trout as the 'truit'—quite naturally, too."

"That settles the matter. Judgment for the defender," said Mr. Forbes. "Gang awa', maun, and get measured for a kilt, without mair switherin'."

For this five minutes following his return from the glen with Meg, Rex Castle was the centre of the group on the terrace. Hubert Lotha seemed outside the attention of every one. He had not risen from his chair, although Lady Athol had left hers; and the expression on his face was glowing rather than bright. It was Mr. Forbes who tactfully drew him into the conversation. But a moment after this union was effected, Rex Castle said good-bye to every one. Lady Athol noted the momentary expression on her daughter's face while she gave him her hand, nor did she fail at the same instant to observe the look which was in his eyes.

She felt quite satisfied with the result of her observation—so satisfied that, like the skilful tactician she knew herself to be, she followed up what she believed to be a great success by a very clever move. This was a move away from her daughter and Hubert Lotha, so that they were left together on one of the stone seats of the paved terrace.

And yet during the previous hour she had been congratulating herself more than once upon the success with which she had kept them apart.

It was only a consummate tactician as well as a subtle observer that would have ventured upon such a move. But Lady Athol was both. She knew that after Meg's stroll through the glen by the side of Mr. Castle she might safely be left on the terrace by the side of Mr. Lotha. Having seen the light that came to the girl's eyes for the moment that her hand lay in Rex Castle's, she felt that the other man, even with the halo of romance still clinging to him, was harmless.

But the other man was surprised. He had been feeling for some days past more strongly than ever that his visit would have been very much more satisfactory if Lady Athol had prolonged her round of visits to her friends. He had not liked the way she regarded her daughter's movements, and he had resented her quiet but effective interference with that course of billiard lessons which he had undertaken. Most of all he had chafed against her monopoly of himself for the previous hour while Meg and Castle were exploring the glen. But now he was beginning to feel that he had misjudged her. After all, she was not hostile to him; or perhaps she had changed her mind in regard to him at the suggestion of her daughter. He thought that it was quite possible that her daughter had given her a hint—but he could not see that Meg had had any chance of making a communication to her mother.

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At any rate, for the first time for a week he was alone with the girl, and it would be his own fault if he did not avail himself of such an opportunity to say something that he had not a chance of saying during the previous week.

"I wonder if Castle meant anything by his cross-examination of me in that way at lunch," he remarked.

"I did not notice anything—cross-examination? How?" she asked.

"Don't you recollect that he was rather insistent in asking me where I came from?"

"I really didn't notice anything like that. I thought that it was mother—or was it Mr. Forbes?—who asked you about the colonies. Didn't Mr. Castle say something about your taking a broad view of—of—was it Australia?"

"Of course Sir Drummond or Lady Athol had every right to question me, considering that I am their guest; but I had a feeling that it was no business of Castle's where I came from," said he.

"I really think that you put a wrong construction upon what he said, Mr. Lotha; I cannot believe that he meant to—to—to suggest anything," said Meg. "I am sure that I should have received an impression of anything like that if Mr. Castle's question had even hinted at it. But I assure you that I did nothing of the sort. If I had an impression of any sort it was that he had been complimentary—in a way."

"And he didn't say anything afterwards when



he had a chance with you alone?" he inquired boldly, looking at her straight in the face.

"Not a word. He never mentioned your name. I am sure that he had forgotten that he put any question to you at lunch—I know that I had, at any rate. Even now I cannot recall——"

"Don't trouble yourself about it. It is only a trifling matter. It does not affect you or any of your friends in the smallest degree. It only affected me, and I am not worth a thought."

"Don't talk about yourself in that way, please, Mr. Lotha. Surely you must give us credit for some feeling of gratitude. I know how my father thinks of you—how we all think of you. Do you fancy that we shall ever forget what——"

"Oh, that's the worst thought of all—the reflection that you think of me with gratitude is unsupportable. It makes me feel sometimes inclined to rise up and run away from you all. It makes me feel that I was a fool ever to yield to your father's permission and come here. I had an instinct that I should never have yielded. Gratitude—gratitude! As if the reflection that I was able to do some service—a simple service that involved the running of no risk—to any woman, would not be a reward immeasurably greater than I had earned by anything that I did! Oh, I only wish with all my heart that I had a chance of doing something that would show you how I feel toward you. Do you think that if it came to giving up my life for you I would hold back?"

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He was speaking rapidly—with tremulous eagerness, in a low earnest voice, suggesting a passionate feeling that was repressed only with difficulty.

He had clearly surprised her. Her face had become red as a rose in June, and when he made a pause she was unable to speak for some time. But he was not looking at her. He was sitting with his head bent forward, gazing at the flags of the terrace.

"I am so sorry—so very sorry," was all that she could say.

"Why should you be sorry?" he cried. "What has happened to make you sorry?"

"I am sorry that you should be led to think us insincere," she said.

"Don't fancy for a moment that I accuse you of that," he cried. "What I feel—it may be foolish on my part, but I do feel it deeply—I feel that your sense of gratitude is more than I can bear. You overwhelm me with it."

"You only feel that because like all brave men you cannot rightly estimate what your bravery has meant to others," said she. "How can we forget for a moment what you have done for us? We shall never, never forget that but for you——"

"If I hadn't sent those fellows to the right about some one else would have done so. I feel myself to be a complete impostor, because I see this so clearly. I know that I am at heart a miserable coward; I am not brave enough to do what I know

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I should do just now, and that is to put on my hat and leave this place and never see your face again."

"Why should you talk in this way? You must know how hurt we should be if you were to do anything of the sort. We should never forgive ourselves."

"I tell you I am not brave enough to go as I should. I am a fool, but—oh, I would to Heaven that you could get rid of that idea of being under a debt of gratitude to me. Again I implore of you to think of me as far more than repaid by the reflection that I have been able to do something for you."

He spoke with such evident sincerity and with such earnestness that before he had quite finished she had a sudden impulse to put out her hand to him.

"You are a man," she said. "I think I know now how a man feels about such things. I have never understood it before."

He only held her hand for a moment. When he dropped it he sat staring straight before him. After the lapse of some moments he turned quickly to her again, saying in a low voice—

"I wish I could tell you something about myself—the one thing which would make all the difference in the world in our relations—in the way I would be regarded by your father—by all of you. But that is the one thing which I feel I must keep a secret at all hazards. I cannot tell it even to you."

I believe that Mr. Forbes has begun to suspect it; but should he find it out he will, I am confident, keep his discovery to himself. If this thing had not existed—this secret of which I only was aware—I would never have accepted your father's invitation to this house."

She was plainly surprised.

"You have interested me greatly," she said. "I cannot guess what is your meaning—in what direction your words should lead me. Are you quite sure that you should tell us nothing?"

"I am quite sure that I would not for worlds that you knew anything of what I can tell—at least just now. I am in hopes that one day something may happen to unseal my lips, but until that time comes my lips must be sealed. I can reveal nothing even to you. But having told you so much I am sure that you will understand how difficult I find my position here. I am sure that you will know now how it was I resented the cross-examination of Mr. Castle respecting the places where I had been. Of course it was perfectly true that I had been in Australia; but it did not suit my purpose to say in what part of Australia I had lived. That was why I was so vague."

"I am sure that you needn't think for another moment about that, Mr. Lotha. No one could possibly fancy that you were being cross-examined. Why, it was only an ordinary conversation over the table. Indeed, as I have told you, the particulars actually escaped my mind. I am certain that

no one at the table could possibly have thought that you found yourself in an awkward—perhaps I should say, a distressing position. Can you doubt that if any of us had had the first idea that you did not wish to be asked about that—that part of your life, we would have kept the chat in another direction?"

"I don't doubt any of your family, but I am not certain of your friends."

"Oh, Mr. Castle would be the last to say an inconsiderate word! But perhaps you mean Mr. Forbes."

"I did not mean Mr. Forbes, but as for Castle I cannot say that he showed himself very ready to take the hint I gave him that his cross-examination of me was distasteful."

"He could have had no idea that—that there was anything which——"

"Which I wished to avoid? Well, perhaps not. At any rate, it matters nothing to me now what conclusions he drew from my reluctance to reply to him, so long as I stand right with you. All I care about is to stand right with you. That is all I have to say to you. If I did not stand right with you I should be the most wretched man living. I am only sorry that I cannot be more explicit—that I cannot even give you a hint of my secret just yet. I can only hope that the time will soon come when I can tell you everything. If I keep my secret for the present be assured that it is not because there is anything disgraceful in it."

"No one could think for a moment that there was."

"I am not so sure of that. But as I say, nothing that any one else may think matters so long as I have you with me. When I tell you the truth one day you will see clearly that I kept my secret through a sense of honour. So far from its injuring me to divulge it, it would in the estimation of a good many people be greatly to my advantage to do so. But I cannot—I long ago made up my mind that I would not go contrary to what I believe to be the dictates of honour. There I must leave the whole matter, lest I should be tempted to say more than I should say. You will not do me an injustice, I know, whatever any one else may be disposed to do."

"Indeed you may trust me. Have I not good reason to think all that is good about you, Mr. Lotha?"

"Ah, because you think you are in my debt?"

"No, indeed. Leaving any question of gratitude aside, I feel that you are a—a—a man—that includes everything, doesn't it? Yes, I shall never cease to feel that in meeting you I have met a true man."

Once again that womanly impulse came upon her, and she stretched out her hand to him. The blood rushed to his face as he caught it in his own. His impulse—a manly impulse—was to carry it passionately to his lips, but how could he do so when at the other angle of the terrace Sir Drum-

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mond and Mr. Forbes were sitting, and when there was no certainty that Lady Athol might not be looking out of one of the library windows immediately behind the stone seat?

All he could do was to hold her hand for a fervent half minute, and then bend his head over it, saying—

"It is enough. I am satisfied."

## CHAPTER XVI

THERE is no nation in the world that understands so thoroughly the importance of keeping the eyes open and the mouth shut as the Scotch, and Mr. Forbes was an excellent representative of the Scotch nation. He had always found that his system of observing everything—especially such incidents as were not intended to come under his observation—and of listening to everything that was being said around him—especially such things as he was not meant to hear, was very advantageous to the forming of a sound judgment upon various subjects in which he was interested.

Now and again he had thought it prudent to say a word or two to stimulate and encourage the people around him to continue saying things which in some cases they would have been ready to give the world to recall; but as a rule he found that he could get on very well by keeping his mouth closed.

He had encouraged Hubert Lotha to say something that he regarded as important before that little luncheon party, and he had also contributed a stimulating word or two in the course of that very satisfactory meal; but all this time he had been silently taking observations with a view to



find out the exact position of affairs, just as a master mariner "takes the sun" in order to find out the position of the ship.

He had kept his eyes upon his young friend Meg when she was in the neighbourhood of Rex Castle, and he fancied that he had gathered a good deal from his observation in that direction; and he had watched closely the face of Hubert Lotha while those casual inquiries were being put to him on the subject of his early life, and the result he regarded as interesting. But he had not thought it prudent to say more than a few words to Sir Drummond until he should have an opportunity of verifying his "day's work," to make use of the phrase of the master mariner.

A little later he had noticed—not without admiration—the adroitness shown by Lady Athol in keeping the one man by her side on the terrace while the other was permitted to roam away through the glen with her daughter. All this he could easily understand—as a matter of fact, he had anticipated all that had occurred, and had he been an artist he could easily have drawn, by the aid of charcoal, the very expression worn by Lotha when Meg and her companion had disappeared among the pines of the glen. But what he could not for the life of him understand was the move made by Lady Athol by which Meg and Lotha, whom she had shown herself so anxious to keep apart during the week, were thrown together. It seemed to him that the lady whom he had accredited with the greatest skill as a matronly tactician, was acting in the most

contradictory manner. Was she not now compelling the man whom she had prevented by her vigilance from having a single *tête-à-tête* with her daughter, to sit by her daughter's side for close upon half-an-hour?

Mr. Forbes was, as a rule, an accurate student of the designs both of men and women, but this last move in the interesting game of which he was a spectator was a baffling one to him. Lady Athol's strategy was too subtle for him. He could not perceive how Lady Athol should know that the best way by which Meg could judge of the inferiority of Hubert Lotha was by placing her by his side immediately after she had had that stroll through the glen with Rex Castle. Mr. Forbes had not the chance, which Lady Athol took care to have, of noting the look that was in Meg's eyes after her stroll; but even if he had been so blessed it is doubtful if he would have had the instinct to interpret it aright—an instinct with which Lady Athol was most certainly endowed. He might, being a man, have been foolish enough to attribute it to the exhilaration of that stroll by the trout stream. Lady Athol knew better, being a woman.

The next day there was a shooting party on the mountain with the Keiths and a pleasant lunch among some sheltering crags, at which all the womenfolk were present. Two girls of the Keith's party carried guns, and had wiped the eyes of some of the men—at least so they fondly imagined; but the men, if questioned on their honour, would have affirmed that a couple of girls with a couple of

guns on a moor that needed some careful working were a couple of nuisances. The keepers, at any rate, were unanimous on this point when eating their bannocks and drinking their whisky, well out of ear-shot of the delinquents. But, then, it is well known that women do not understand the art of tipping as it is understood on a Scotch grouse moor.

The day's sport before lunch was excellent, but the lunch was so excellent also that it threatened to interfere with the afternoon's shoot, which was a pity, considering that it was to take place over the Braecleugh mountain where the grouse were always plentiful. The keepers were getting impatient, seeing that the men of the party were beginning to fill their pipes for the second time, lying on the springy heather on the broad of their backs and showing no inclination to make a move.

When at last they were roused to action and trudged off under the leadership of Mr. Keith, somebody looking back every now and again to respond to a word of mock advice or warning from the women, who were shaking the crumbs off their serviceable tweed skirts, Mr. Forbes, who was not shooting, announced that he was going for a hard walk over the moor and that he would most probably have tea with Andrew Macfee at his cottage, unless he got lost in the mean time, through not being able to recognize any of the once familiar landmarks.

"If you do not return before six o'clock search parties will go after you," cried Lady Athol.

"And if they find me they'll most likely have to depend upon me to bring them safe back," said he, waving his stick in a moorland farewell.

Meg would not have minded being his companion, but she saw that he wished to be alone. She was a girl of imagination and she could easily guess what the moor meant to the Scotch lawyer whose thoughts must often have gone back to it when he sat in his gloomy office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. She could understand how he should like this solitary ramble among the scenery of his boyhood, for she knew that though solitary it would not be lonely; his memories of the past would keep him company, and every crag would give him back an old friend.

She was right. Although he had been on this part of the mountain more than once during the fortnight he had spent at Craig Athol, yet he found the same joy as he had known in his youth, striding over the billowy ground, sliding down into a hollow here and setting his feet to climb sturdily up the brae there, renewing his youth at every step, and recalling the faces of the boys who had been his companions here in the old days. Some of them were dead and gone, others had made names for themselves in the world far away from their native heather, but he knew that wherever these might be they would still breathe at moments the fresh scents of the mountain, and turn their eyes from lines of silent palms to these crags which had once been ever in sight.

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Macfee's cottage was a good three miles across the mountain, but he made light of such a journey. He would not have shrunk from a ten-mile trudge over the same ground. It was not like walking through the streets of London. He wanted to have another chat with the crofter who possessed that strange endowment of second sight. He felt as King Saul may have done when he went in secret to the witch of Endor to help him when he found himself in a very tight place. Mr. Forbes felt that he had been doing detective's work ever since he had come northward in response to Sir Drummond's summons—a summons due, he could not forget, to the suggestions made by Macfee—but although he had not spared himself in any way, and had, as he thought, got upon some tracks leading in the right direction, still he was not making the progress which he had hoped to make. He had not gained that confidence in whatever theories had been suggested to him, which had usually followed his working out of some of those legal problems that he had solved in the course of his life. He had let no incident pass unnoticed since he had found that the name Lotha could be re-formed into Athol, but though now and again he believed that he had gained all the information which it was possible for him to get, bearing upon the problem to be solved, he was still not satisfied. His legally trained mind was not easily satisfied. It apprehended the difference between surmise and conviction, and he had not sufficient confidence in the result of his observation or in his doing more

than to counsel his client not to be in a hurry in coming to the conclusion that all things were what they seemed to be.

If any client of his in London had suggested to him the advisability not of applying for counsel's opinion on some point in a case that he was getting up, but of paying a visit to one of the palmists of Bond Street, whose names and qualifications he had seen set forth on the breast-plate and backpiece of half-a-dozen sandwich-men, he would have felt truly scandalized; and yet here he was on his way to consult a middle-aged Highland crofter who professed to be endowed with a power more mysterious than that advertised on the perambulating sandwich-boards of Piccadilly.

It was not surprising that he should prefer to make this journey unaccompanied. The lawyer part of him was rather ashamed of his errand, and nothing would have induced him to make a professional visit to a professor of second sight in Bond Street, London. But at heart he was a Highlander, and none of those Highland superstitions of which he had drunk deep in his youth had wholly left him. Of course they were unprofessional; but now he was taking a holiday, and he maintained his self-respect by reflecting upon the fact that if he were to put on a knickerbocker suit and sling his golf clubs on his shoulder and prepare carefully a tee on the "refuge" at Oxford Circus, he would be looked on as a lunatic, whereas if he were to appear in the streets of St. Andrews in a tall hat and with a cowhide deed-bag in his

gloved hand he would cause people to nudge each other as he went by them.

In London he was a lawyer, and in a case of perplexity he went to consult Sir Edward. In the Highlands he was a Highlander, and was on his way to consult Andrew Macfee.

The crofter was not at home when he reached the substantial cottage where he lived; but the guid wife was wiping the flour from her arms, and the kitchen was pervaded with the delightful smell of bannocks on a griddle above a turf fire; and he had not eaten a wheaten bannock fresh from the griddle for three years, and even then he had only had one.

"Jean, wumman, this is sure the treat that I came for to the Hielands," he cried, lifting up his hands as if in the act of blessing the board spread over with a white cloth on which the substantial "tea things" were laid out, and a sniff of the real "powdered" butter came to him as he bent over the table. "Jean, my lass, 'tis Andrew that'll go without bannocks till his tea this nicht gin ye no spread anither griddle fu'."

"Ay, maybe that, Mr. Forbes," said Mrs. Macfee, "wetting" the tea. "Maybe that. But he'll be fastin', gin he speers wha's robbit him."

And then followed a conversation between the two in the Doric which can no more be reproduced phonetically and intelligibly to a Southern reader than can dialogue in the Dorsetshire dialect to a North Briton. Mr. Forbes buttered his bannock, and drank his black and scalding tea, lending an

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attentive ear to all the intimacies of the family chronicles which the good woman bestowed upon him, until Andrew himself arrived to renew the welcome which he had received from the wife, and when he became aware of the shortage in provision, to comment, with the dry humour of his race, upon the niggardly diet of the big house that drove a stranger "chiel" across the mountain for a bit and sup.

Now both Macfee and his guid wife knew perfectly well what was the errand of the lawyer to their croft at this time. Every day during the previous week they had looked for his coming; but neither of them gave a hint of this to him while they were having their meal together. And even when Jean had swept up an apronfu' of crumbs and had gone out to feed her chickens, the two men chattered on many topics for fully a quarter of an hour. But Macfee knew what Mr. Forbes had come to ask him, and Mr. Forbes knew that he knew it, and yet it was only when the stranger looked at his watch, and said, "Hoot toots, it's time I was away!" that he added casually, placing one hand on the table as if about to rise from his seat—

"By the way, Andrew man, I mustn't go before I ask you a bit more about your seeing. But I suppose you haven't anything more to communicate to me."

(He continued, of course, to speak the English of the Highlands, and Macfee responded in the like.)



"I don't know that I've much that's worth the noting," he replied, with a casual shake of the head, which let Mr. Forbes know that he had something of importance to communicate.

"Ay, may be that, Andrew," said he. "Well, well, 'tis a gift that's a bit self willed, I don't doubt, and as fickle flitting as a Jack o' lantern. Only it just occurred to me as I was strolling across the mountain that mayhap you had another sight of the nature of your last. But indeed 'tis no great matter, I'll be going south in a day or two, and 'tis easy for Sir Drummond to drop me a line if so be that you think there's any good to be got out of it. So far as this hasty visit is concerned I'm beginning to think that I might as well have stayed at home."

"Ay, may be that, may be that," remarked the crofter as if the subject was one in which he took only the smallest amount of interest. "And when might you be starting, Mr. Forbes?" he added.

"I don't see what for I need tarry any longer than the morrow morn," replied the lawyer. "Aweel, aweel, if you haven't had any further sights there's nothing more to be said. So good e'en to you, ma frien'."

"Ay, there's nothing more to be said, for I don't suppose that what I saw two days ago is worth the naming," said Macfee, with an affectation of complete indifference.

"I'm no so sure of that," remarked Mr. Forbes. "But I'm not in a hurry for a minute or two. You don't object telling us what you saw. Did you

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see more of Douglas Athol among the half-naked nigger bodies?"

The man shook his head.

"I had a sight of him, but he was sitting by the side of Miss Meg in the glen and it looked as though they were well pleased to be together."

"That wasn't a remarkable speer, frien' Andrew. 'Tis myself that would like to see that picture in the life. But there's nobody that I know of that has been with Miss Meg in the glen only Mr. Castle, the guest of the Keiths, and Mr. Lotha, who stays with us at Craig Athol."

"I can go no further than to say what I saw, Mr. Forbes. And one morn I woke Jean by crying out that Maister Douglas was passing the house. She bid me lie still, for it was no more than daylight, but I got out of bed and went to the door, and speert out."

"And what did you see?"

"I saw only a man with a dog—one of the Keith's dogs—a gentleman, well set up and very black-a-vised, walking beyond there, twirling a stick. I expect that he was one of the Keith's party that had a fancy for an early walk on the mountain. They often do things like that, being, may be, Englishmen that's restless and sleepless by reason of having too much spare time on their hands. Oh, ay; more than one of that like has woke us up at midnight or later asking the way back. They had wandered far afield and so had lost themselves, knowing more of the streets of London than mountain ways."

"But this chiel didn't ask the way?"

"No, sir; he seemed to know his way well enough. He just went on jauntily swinging his stick, with a friendly word every now and again to his dog."

"He didn't hail you?"

"He had gone by the door a fair way before I looked out so he couldn't see me without he turned right about. And I didn't hail him, being in my shirt only."

"I see. Well, there's not much in that, is there, Andrew?"

"Nothing at all, Mr. Forbes, nothing at all. And so you'll be going south the morrow?"

"Ay, or may be the next day."

## CHAPTER XVII

ALL the way down the mountain to Craig Athol Mr. Forbes pondered upon what the Highlander had told him, the substance of which, rendered into English, has been given in detail. The first impression of which he was aware on leaving the croft was one of disappointment. It seemed pretty plain that Macfee had, in these instances which he had mentioned of the exercise of his peculiar faculty, been influenced in the ordinary way of people who have dreams. He had probably seen Meg walking through the glen with some one—she was there almost every day—and his mind dwelling upon Douglas Athol, he had had an ordinary dream.

But whatever doubt there might be in this instance, there could scarcely be any question that it was from a very ordinary dream he had awakened calling out the name of Douglas Athol. Mr. Forbes knew how easily dreams are produced and with what rapidity: the simple ringing of a bell has brought about an apparently long dream of the incidents of a railway-station, and of the dreamer's rushing to catch a train that was steaming away from the platform. He remembered that he himself had once dreamt in a railway carriage

of being strangled by a burglar; and had awakened with a cry only to find that his cramped attitude in the corner of the seat had caused his collar to press rather too tightly under his chin.

There was no doubt on his mind that Macfee had heard in his sleep some sound made by the man with the dog when close to the cottage, and this had been sufficient to bring on an instantaneous dream in which, as usual, Douglas Athol was the central or the solitary figure.

No, he could not feel that he had gained much by his visit to the croft of Andrew Macfee. He had not been as successful as King Saul had been in his visit to the Witch of Endor. And this reflection induced him to feel that there was not so much, after all, in that second-sight faculty, and to try to make himself believe that he had taken the journey to Macfee's croft simply because of his old friendship for the man.

He entertained the people at Craig Athol that night with an account of his afternoon tea with Jean, and of the way he had treated the bannocks. If he had been generous with the bannocks they had returned the compliment. But, alas! for the dark-complexioned tea! His auld acquaintance with that decoction was not forgot. He was unable to sleep until long past midnight by reason of his failing to resist the second cup which the guid wife had pressed upon him. She had pressed it upon him, and it had been pressing on him ever since.

Shortly before lunch the next day, when he had

written a few letters and half-a-dozen telegrams, he strolled out on the terrace with his pipe and a newspaper or two. The usual breeze was blowing, so that, when his fourth match was blown out, he saw there was nothing for it, if he wished to light his pipe, but to go round to the leese of the house. He did so, but even here there was a strong current of air; so, glancing round for a shelter, he thought that the recess of one of the windows would serve, and went toward it. When he put his head close he could not but look into the room beyond, and the first glance showed him that some one was in the room. A man was standing in front of the portrait of the lovely girl with the dog. He was gazing at it as though quite absorbed with its beauty; and then he went close to it and kissed the face several times.

The moment he turned half way round Mr. Forbes saw that he was Rex Castle.

Down went Mr. Forbes' pipe and back he almost jumped from the window.

"Good lord!" he whispered. "Good lord!"

He had stooped down, and having recovered his pipe, was grumbling over his stupidity in letting it fall, when Rex Castle opened one of the wings of the window and stepped out.

Mr. Forbes professed to be greatly surprised.

"Hallo! how do you come here?" he cried.

"Lord! Do you see what a fool I've made of myself? I was going to the shelter of the window frame to light up, when I bungled over shifting the match-box from one hand to the other, and—

no, I hope the pipe isn't broken; but if it's not it's more by guid luck than guid guiding. Have you just come into the room?"

"I have been waiting for a minute or two," replied Castle. "Mrs. Keith sent me—or rather I volunteered to come—with the address of a tailor whose speciality is a tweed cap—Lady Athol asked for it yesterday. Everybody seems to have gone out. I am lucky to have come upon you, Mr. Forbes."

"You compliment me, sir," said Mr. Forbes. "No, it's perfectly sound, I'm happy to say; but it's a maircy that 'tis so." He had completed a scientific survey of the pipe while Mr. Castle had been explaining how he came to be at Craig Athol at so early an hour. "Won't you smoke yourself, Mr. Castle? Have you any fancy in tobacco? You're not like some seasoned Indians that I've come across who gave themselves up body and soul to Trichies. I've seen you smoke a real cigar."

"I never took kindly to Trichies," said Castle. "The fact is that I saw them being made. It was interesting, but I felt that I could do well enough with Havanas from that day on."

"I can easily believe that. I once had cause to pass through a kitchen belonging to a hotel I stayed at in Italy, and I never was so abstemious in all my life as during the week following. 'Tis best not to be over curious in these matters, I'm thinking. But I suppose you hardly call yourself a well-seasoned Indian, Mr. Castle. You were not very long in those parts, were you?"

"I have hardly been anywhere else," replied Castle. "I went straight out to India from Scotland nearly twenty years ago, and I never once took a holiday home, though I spent some months at one time in China and half-a-year in Japan."

"Never once home? I'm beginning to think that there's some truth in what the man said about Scotsmen going in every direction except in the direction of Scotland. Twenty years is a long time, Mr. Castle."

"It seems a very long time, but it wasn't as if I was in penal servitude. I had plenty of work to do, I can assure you, and I soon came to have no interest in life apart from my work."

"That's the best way to get on. But I'm not sure that it's the healthiest."

"No more am I. There are other things in the world that should engross a man's attention besides making money. I know now that I should have returned long before now."

"It's usually the mother or a sister—sometimes even a stranger lassie that draws a young man homewards. Had you none of these?"

"None. My mother, whom I loved, was dead. My father's treatment of me drove me away. I had no sister. What was there to bring me back to Scotland?"

"But now that you have come back, do you mean to stay?"

Rex Castle did not answer immediately. He stood for some time looking straight in front of



him as if the question suggested a great deal to him that required thought.

"Maybe I shouldn't have asked such a question, Mr. Castle; it's a lawyer's question, isn't it?" said Mr. Forbes.

"It's not one that I can answer in a moment," said Castle. "My heart is in the Highlands. I feel sometimes as if I should never want to leave Scotland, and later on I am led to wish that I had never returned. That's how I feel at present. Whether I stay or go depends on how things turn out during the next week or two."

"Ah, I fancied that you had an eye on some property, and were negotiating for its purchase," said Mr. Forbes; but though he spoke seriously there was something in his tone that made his listener smile.

"Something that way—oh, yes; a most desirable property, Mr. Forbes," he said. "What advice would you be disposed to give any one thinking of settling in the Highlands? You are a shrewd man of business, I know."

"Without prejudice I would be disposed to advise caution, great caution," he replied. "But this is commonplace advice. There are cases when boldness is needed—a bold stroke."

"I'm not sure that I'm the man for that," said Castle. "I'm too much of a Scotsman. Our friend Lotha is the man for bold strokes and effective. If it hadn't been for that bold stroke of his a few weeks ago he wouldn't be in this neighbour-

hood to-day. I wonder what neig'bourhood he would be in, by the way."

"In the neighbourhood of Australia, maybe," remarked Mr. Forbes.

Rex Castle laughed.

"Or some equally vague locality," he said.

"Doesn't he strike you as being a little vague altogether?" said Forbes.

"I don't express any opinion on that point, Mr. Forbes," replied Castle. "As for vagueness—well, some people might hint that I was a trifle vague myself. None of you have pressed the question as to what part of Scotland I came from. You were all very tactful lest I should be led inadvertently to give myself away."

"Give yourself away—how?"

"Well, I have an impression that Lady Athol—perhaps Sir Drummond himself—believes that I am one of those Scotsmen who begin life in the auld clay biggin', or perhaps a back street in a town, and make a fortune in a few years abroad, or if they stay at home, start a small shop in the bacon line and then a second shop and a third until the number runs into thousands—Lady Athol fears that, having made the fortune, the name of the town where I swept out the shop and took down the shutters might grate upon my ears. Perhaps you had—perhaps you *have* the same idea."

"It may have occurred to me—something in that way, at any rate, only you see I may have thought with Sir Drummond that if you were good enough for the Keiths you were good enough for us. The

Drummonds took you on trust, being a friend of the Keiths just now, whatever you may have been at the start. But I may remind you that you had a chance of naming your birthplace at lunch the other day and you neglected it."

"And you refrained from pressing me on that possibly sore point? You were tactful."

"Hoot toots! Mr. Castle. Who would think of asking for a passport of respectability from a friend of the Keiths?"

"I'm lucky in my sponsors. Anyhow, may I take the opportunity now, though I neglected it at lunch the other day, of assuring you that I am respectably connected, though I should prefer for the present saying nothing about the auld clay biggin' or the corner shop with the sides of bacon?"

"The Keiths know all about you, I'm sure, and, as I say, that's enough for our friends the Drummonds. It's only our friend Lotha that has been admitted without sponsors."

"On the contrary, it seems to me that he has far higher credentials than any I could show. No one ever thinks of making any inquiry respecting the hero of the hour, who rides through the castle gates with the maiden whom he has just rescued from a caitiff, safe and sound in front of him. Sir Drummond and Lady Athol recognize how much they owe to this Mr. Lotha."

Mr. Forbes allowed several seconds to elapse before he said cautiously—

"And the young lady herself, Mr. Castle, has she a true sense of her obligations?"

"I cannot doubt it, Mr. Forbes," said Castle, rather gloomily.

"And how does the sense of her indebtedness affect her, do you think?" asked the lawyer in a low and confidential tone.

"Good heavens, Mr. Forbes, why should you put such a question to me?" cried the other. "Have you not had as many opportunities as myself of coming to a conclusion on that—that—on whatever your question suggests? You are a much more shrewd observer than I could ever hope to be."

"I ask your pardon, Mr. Castle. I only ventured to put that inquiry to you, because I know that all the power of observing that one may possess is a poor informant compared with the power of feeling."

Mr. Castle looked narrowly at the elderly lawyer as if he were exceedingly anxious to discover what was the thought that had caused him to ask his question and to offer such an explanation for doing so. But Mr. Forbes was used to be looked at narrowly, and he bore the scrutiny without flinching. So far as expression was concerned his face became a blank.

A moment later Rex Castle had turned his eyes away from Mr. Forbes to the figures that appeared round the angle of the house—the figures of Hubert Lotha and Meg Athol walking side by side.

And now it was the turn of Mr. Forbes to look narrowly at the expression on the face of Rex Castle, and then carelessly, but with a much closer

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scrutiny, the face of Meg Athol, and, a second or two later, the face of her companion.

Within the space of the few seconds necessary for the triple observation, he learned more of the situation as it affected the three people than would have been possible for him to gain by an hour's close cross-examination of each of them.

They were all very pleasant to one another on meeting, and Mr. Lotha spoke enthusiastically and even eloquently of the glimpse of the waterfall which he owed to the kindness of Miss Athol, who had discovered the point of view whence it could be seen to such advantage.

## CHAPTER XVIII

"WHO is your friend Mr. Lothair?" Miss Bertha Isfield asked of Meg Athol as they sat together after lunch a day or two later. Miss Isfield, the accomplished daughter of Sir Adrian Isfield of Farncombe, Sussex, was the first of the new arrivals at Craig Athol. By the end of the week half-a-dozen other guests would be joined to the house party. Miss Isfield was a young woman whose good looks had been so negated as an attraction by her reputation for cleverness, that she had reached the age of twenty-seven without being married. Cleverness, unless displayed in the management of a horse in the hunting field, counts distinctly against a young woman in the circle in which Miss Isfield moved. She had been the exhibition girl at the school at Eastbourne when Meg had joined that expensive establishment, and the friendship that had sprung up between them had been prolonged after their separation, Bertha having arrived at the "finished" stage two years before Meg had reached it; and every year since the former had passed a week of the autumn at Craig Athol, where every one admired her—within reason.

"His name is Lotha, not Lothair—that's the name of the hero of a novel," replied Meg.

"And who is he? I never heard the name before. I really thought you called him Mr. Lothair, his style is not unlike that of the hero of a novel in the days when heroes existed—in novels," said Bertha.

"He is better than the hero of a novel—he is one in reality," said Meg.

"What, has he invented an aeroplane or run up against the South Pole? Don't say that he is a scratch golf man or a minus two croquet man," cried Bertha.

"I didn't write an account of my adventure to you because we agreed that it would be better not to let the story get into the papers," said Meg.

"What adventure? Don't tell me that you actually took part in an adventure, Meg?"

"Very well, I won't tell you."

"I mean, do tell me, but for goodness' sake don't tell any one else. To have any connection with an adventure in these times, unless an adventure on the Stock Exchange, is considered in very bad taste."

"I know that quite well, and so I didn't write even to you about it."

"Oh, well, you might have made an exception of me. You know that I would never dream of giving you away. And what was the racket and where does Mr.—Mr. Lotha come in and how? Swimming out to rescue you from a dangerous part

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of the shore—covered at high water, and the tide flowing rapidly in, and that sort of thing—extremely well adapted for treatment on a cinematograph?"

"That's commonplace. My adventure was far more romantic than anything like that. Mine belongs to the eighteenth century exclusively. Nothing modern in it except a revolver."

"Now you are romancing."

"Not I. My dear Bertha, it sounds very unreal and melodramatic and all that, now, but I can assure you that it was only too real while it lasted."

Then she gave her friend as briefly as possible an account of her adventure from the moment of her leaving her aunt's house up to the opportune appearance of Hubert Lotha and her return. Bertha listened, a little smile on her face at first, but soon she became intensely interested, only making an exclamation now and again—sometimes of sympathy, sometimes of incredulity.

"Now you can understand why we did not want the papers to get hold of the story," said Meg. "Think what they would have made of it—an eighteenth-century romance brought up to date. And Mr. Lotha was the first to see that point. That was why he let the men get off. He had a revolver, and the three of them were at his mercy. I saw it all. But he had the tact to refrain from doing anything that would have given the papers a chance."

"And given himself a chance as well—a chance



of being photographed as a twentieth century—  
What's-his-name?—the man who went about rescu-  
ing maidens? What self-sacrifice! But what  
about bringing the culprits to justice?"

"He thought it better to let them go, and we  
agreed with him. I have just said so."

"But surely you had found out something about  
them—surely you found out who it was put the plot  
in action, and why. What could these common  
men hope to gain by kidnapping a poor harmless  
girl like Meg?"

"He compelled them to tell him who it was that  
employed them; but they mentioned the name of a  
man who could not possibly have had anything to  
do with the business, though at first it seemed that  
he might have been implicated in it."

"May I know the name of the man?"

"You have met him. He was at our last dance.  
The Barone del Greppo."

"And you are quite sure that he had nothing to  
do with it? The whole plot sounds very Italian.  
It was understood that he had a certain  
*tendresse*——"

"He had nothing to do with the business. So  
much is sure. He had sailed for South America  
some days before. Besides, he is a gentleman."

"He is an Italian, at any rate, and the plot is  
just such as would come out of the romantic brain  
of an Italian."

"Of course every one thought so at first—every  
one but myself. I knew that the Barone was not

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the sort of man who would be concerned in so cowardly an affair."

Miss Isfield was silent. She was clearly thinking over the details of the singular story which her friend had just communicated to her. There was the frown of hard thinking on her face. Several minutes had passed before she said—

"I began by asking you who Mr. Lotha was. Let me remind you that you never answered me."

"I told you who he was," said Meg. "If you don't know after hearing the story I cannot——"

"Your story only tells me what he is; I asked you who he is. What he is is the hero. But who is he? Is his name in the Army List?" said Bertha. "What family does he belong to?—I never came across any people of the name of Lotha."

"He is colonial—Australian, I believe. Yes, he said he had lived for some years in Australia, but he has been in many other places—South America, South Africa, India."

"He has had an adventurous life, then? Another proof that adventures come to the adventurous. Has he told you many of his other adventures?"

"Hardly one. Such a man is not likely to be a boaster."

"The most unlikely in the world. What about his means? Is he well off? Oh, if he did not boast about other things it is not to be thought of that he would brag of his wealth, or even of his poverty. Most men are given to brag of their

poverty now-a-days, as if it was something highly creditable."

"I don't know anything of his means. Why should I?"

"Why, indeed? It would be premature, would it not?"

"Premature? I don't know what you mean, Bertha. It cannot be that—that——"

"Oh, dear no, nothing of the sort. But, at the same time, if you did . . . You are naturally inclined to look on him as a bit of a hero."

"That is true; but——"

"Now don't commit yourself, my dear Meg. I don't ask you to commit yourself. He is quite a presentable man, whoever he may be. You are lucky in that."

"Don't be absurd, Bertha. What have I——"

"Good gracious, child; isn't it much pleasanter to think that you were rescued by a nice, well-set-up man than by a common lout?"

"I don't like the way you talk about this matter," said Meg, after a space of silence. "But the way you talk is just the way the newspapers would have talked, and that shows how wise it was not to give them the chance. Now let us talk about somebody else."

"Why should we? We haven't nearly exhausted your Mr. Lotha as a topic. Besides, it would hardly be fair to the next person. When a hero has been the topic, the next person talked about cannot but seem ridiculously inferior. Is he due

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at some other country houses immediately, or does he mean to go abroad again in search of adventures?"

Meg shook her head.

"How can I tell? I never asked him what his plans were," she said, somewhat impatiently.

"He wasn't staying in Yorkshire with any people known to Mrs. Egremont?" persisted Bertha.

"He never mentioned that he was staying with any one in the neighbourhood, or if he did I have forgotten all about it. Don't you think that you should put all these personal questions to himself personally?"

"I'm not quite sure that I should, interested though I am in him. He really should be called Lothair—or, perhaps, Lothario."

Meg gave a little impatient head shake, with the frown that goes naturally with such a motion.

"I'm ashamed of you—quite ashamed of you," she said. "Ashamed and surprised. This way of talking—of suggesting things about a man whom you have never seen before does not go well with our surroundings here, though it might sound all right and natural in Queen's Gate."

(The Isfields' town house was in Queen's Gate.)

The clever girl lay back in her chair and laughed, nursing her knee and swinging her foot carelessly to and fro. But when she made her toe just touch Meg's ankle, Meg turned upon her and gave her a sound smack on the shoulder, which she succeeded only partially in warding off.

"That will do," she cried. "I admit—all that I should admit. But I will still persist in saying that Mr. Lotha is quite a presentable man. So he is, you know."

That was the end of their chat together with Mr. Lotha as the topic, for Lady Athol came into the room to tell her daughter that a telegram had just come from Cliffords inquiring if their visit might be postponed for two days. The Cliffords were among the visitors expected the following week.

"Of course I replied that it made no difference to us," said Lady Athol. "Only I should have liked Colonel Clifford to be put into the oak room. Mr. Lotha is in the oak room just now, and we cannot well turn him out."

"Of course not," said Meg.

"Why not?" asked Miss Isfield, with such an affectation of innocent surprise as set both the others laughing.

"Mr. Lotha is our honoured guest, my dear," said Lady Athol.

"Well, if you can't turn the honoured guest out of his room whom can you turn out?" asked Bertha. "But don't you arrange with your visitors when they are to come and go? You did so with me, I know."

"You mean that you arranged with us," said Meg. "You wrote that you could only give us from the eighteenth to the twenty-ninth."

"It comes to the same thing. Did Mr. Lotha

not say when he had to leave for his next house?"

Lady Athol shook her head.

"The General gave him a generous invitation—how could he do anything else?" she replied. Then she looked inquiringly at her daughter, saying—

"You told Bertha about Mr. Lotha, I suppose."

"She has just told me—all that she knows about him, and the result of her revelation is that I think Mr. Lotha a very presentable man."

"An excellent and legitimate conclusion," said Lady Athol. "But all the same I wish he was in any other room than the one he occupies."

"As the Cliffords have put off their coming by two days, perhaps the room will be vacant by the time they arrive," suggested Bertha.

Lady Athol shook her head, and Bertha Isfield, being a clever young woman, understood perfectly well that what that head shake meant was—

"No such luck."

She perceived that Lady Athol, however cordially she might agree with the definition of Mr. Lotha which Bertha herself had suggested, was unlikely to allow her gratitude to him or her admiration for him to carry her as far as the same feelings had carried both Sir Drummond and Meg.

But Bertha had made good use of the powers of observation with which she had been endowed by nature, and of the opportunities of exercising these powers which she had made for herself, and the result was to impress upon her the fact that mothers

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of attractive and marriageable heiresses seldom allow themselves to be swayed by romantic or sentimental considerations in any question of encouraging the visits of young men of whom they know very little beyond their reputation for personal bravery.

She saw in a moment that the chivalrous feelings of Sir Drummond in respect of their daughter's deliverer were very trying to Lady Athol.

## CHAPTER XIX

MR. FORBES was conscious of an impression of being fooled. But he was not prepared to say to what extent his own rashness—his own precipitancy in coming to a conclusion on a subject which demanded at least the exercise of a reasonable amount of caution in the consideration of its various and varying aspects, had contributed to his being fooled.

He felt inclined to reproach himself with his rashness in allowing himself to be carried along in a certain direction simply because he made the discovery that the name Lotha was an anagram upon the name Athol; and in allowing himself the chuckle of the man who is out of the wood, simply because Mr. Lotha had expressed a highly chivalrous sentiment respecting the possible return alive and well of Douglas Athol—a man who would be, if living, about his own age.

To be sure, he could not but allow that he had some doubts as to whether or not he was justified in rushing to a conclusion on such data only; for had he not, under the influence of such doubts, made that journey to the croft of his friend Andrew Macfee? But still he could not reasonably



feel that this fact exonerated him to any appreciable degree from the charge of unconscionable rashness which he brought against himself.

Every time he took out his pipe which had survived its fall on the flags of the terrace outside the library window, he felt a pang of self-reproach; for he could not forget that the consciousness of his rashness was coincident with the fall of that pipe. He had glanced through the window and had seen a man standing in front of the picture of the mother of Douglas Athol, and then pressing his lips to the cheek of the lady on the canvas.

In that second there had flashed upon him the recollection of the incident which occurred upon the first night of his present visit to Craig Athol, when he had been awakened from sleep by the shriek of the maid. What was the story which she had told him? Was it not of having entered the room and seeing the figure of a man standing in front of that same picture and hearing him speak to it?

And had not the same maid-servant affirmed to him her conviction that the man whom she had seen there was the same dark-faced man who had called at Craig Athol with the Keiths a few days later?

Yes, that was so; and yet he had allowed his attention to be turned away from the man who called himself Rex Castle to the man who called himself Hubert Lotha.

He felt humiliated—unworthy of the position of trust which he had occupied for many years in

relation to the Athol family—unworthy of the profession to which he belonged. He had so badly managed the affair which had so intimate a bearing upon the future of the Athol family, that he was convinced that nothing was left for him but to be straightforward. His powers of observation, his native acumen, his native common-sense had proved of no avail to unravel the mystery of the heirship, so now he feared that all he could do was to place himself in the position of an ordinary person and put a few direct questions to the two men.

But even then the suggestion came to him that in assuming that either of the men was Douglas Athol returned to his native land to claim his inheritance, he was assuming a great deal on very feeble grounds. Neither of the men had laid any claim to be the missing heir, and had it not been for that foolish second sight of Andrew Macfee, which led Sir Drummond to telegraph to him, he would have attached no importance to any of those matters connected with the two men which had turned his attention in a certain direction, causing him a great deal of anxiety, and, worse than that, causing him to feel that he had come perilously near to making a fool of himself. When a lawyer, and a Scotch lawyer into the bargain, is led to feel that nothing is left for him but to be straightforward, it may be taken for granted that he is grievously disappointed with himself.

The more he thought over the incidents of the few weeks that had elapsed since his arrival at Craig

Athol, the more impressed had he become with the fact that only by magnifying and even distorting the simple incidents that had aroused his suspicions, could these incidents be regarded by any reasonable person as anything more than tending in a distant way to suggest that the heir to Craig Athol had returned to the Highlands.

At any rate, he made up his mind that he would no longer fence with either of the men. He would be straightforward with each of them, and so bring the matter to a climax. Having taken a whole day and night to adapt himself to this new rôle which he had made up his mind to play, he came down to the breakfast-room, and found that, as usual, he was the first arrival. But breakfast at Craig Athol was as it should be at every house where more than two people sit down to the table, an indefinite meal. No one had ever been known to come down too soon to be satisfied or too late for the daintiest of the dishes which were on the hot plate on the side-board.

Mr. Forbes sat down to his porridge and cream, and when he had finished this course, with which he invariably began breakfast, south of the Tweed as well as north, he picked up his letters, looking at the caligraphy on each envelope to prepare himself for the contents. The first that he picked up bore the handwriting of his wife. He put it, unopened, into his pocket. He never read his wife's letters until he had got rid of his business communications. The second envelope was a large square

one tied with red tape and largely sealed. This he knew contained official documents forwarded for his scrutiny by his managing clerk. He turned the bulky packet over and cut the tape, and the moment he did so there fell on the table a letter of ordinary size, which had plainly worked its way under the tape when in the post-bag, and so had escaped the attention of the butler who distributed the letters, and who, if it had come under his eye, would have laid it opposite the seat at the table of "Hubert Lotha, Esq.," to whom it was addressed.

Mr. Forbes read the name, and perceiving what had happened, was about to lay it in its proper place, which was nearly facing himself, when some peculiarity of the writing seemed to strike him. He looked at it again, holding it at arm's length in the act of stretching across the table with it. Then he drew it slowly closer to him. He took out his glasses and examined the handwriting with great earnestness for some moments, when he had glanced towards the door. He kept scrutinizing it for actually some minutes, and then, giving a little start, he laid it slowly and reluctantly on the opposite side of the table.

He drew a long breath and still kept his eyes on that envelope lying on the table cloth, to the neglect of his own correspondence at his hand.

"There's a salmi of grouse on the hot plate, sir," said the butler. "But mebbe 'tis a sawmon cutlet you'll be having."

"Ay, a sawmon cutlet to start with," said Mr. Forbes.

He had just been helped to it when Hubert Lotha entered the room, and said good-morning. He replied briskly, adding—

"You'll soon be abreast of me, Mr. Lotha, in the matter of early rising, if you continue improving as you have been doing. Let me recommend a sawmon cutlet to your attention, if you don't feel equal to a basin of porridge. Of course if you start with porridge——"

"Thank you; I'll start with a cutlet," said Lotha, picking up his letter and taking it to a window where he read it, not without being carefully observed by Mr. Forbes. The letter was not a long one, and Lotha, after reading it, put it into his breast pocket and returned to the table, without paying much attention to what Mr. Forbes was saying in praise of porridge. He rather wondered, he said, that Mr. Lotha had not learned the undoubted value of porridge and cream as a foundation for a day of strenuous work.

In the course of another quarter of an hour Sir Drummond and his daughter had appeared, and a little later Miss Isfield took a lively interest in the salmi, and the conversation became general. Mr. Forbes warned Miss Isfield against the dish of her choice, and she defended it, with the result that he helped himself plentifully from the dish before attacking the hot scones and coffee which were awaiting him. Then Miss Isfield affirmed that she

had discovered for herself a way of turning chicken livers into the most appetizing of *hors-d'œuvres*. Her treatment involved the pounding of the things up with crystallized ginger, the rind of a lemon, a drop or two of Tarragon vinegar, a chilli, a suspicion of Parmesan cheese, a dash of *moutarde aux fines herbes*, and a trifle of nutmeg.

"Hoot toots!" cried Mr. Forbes. "My dear young lady, I've no mind to turn myself into a spice chest before starting on a homely dinner."

"That's the usual way a pioneer is treated," said Miss Isfield. "It took me several years and many hours of inward agony before I got the ingredients to be on friendly terms with each other, and yet without a moment's thought you reject the conclusion I came to! This is what it is to be a discoverer!"

Suddenly a thought seemed to occur to Mr. Forbes.

"I'll not have that said of me," he cried. "I'll e'en give the horrible mixture a fair trial. I've made my will and my life is insured. Go over the list once more, and I'll write the ingredients down to make the coroner's work easy. Lend me a slip of paper. Can anybody oblige me with a slip of paper? Mr. Lotha, will you kindly search your pockets for a bit of paper—the back of an envelope will do—now that the fit is upon me."

Lotha had been chatting to Meg, paying no at-

tention to what Mr. Forbes was saying, but when he heard his name mentioned he said—

"I beg your pardon—what slip of paper?"

"Anything to make a note on—the cover of a newspaper—the back of an envelope."

Mechanically the younger man felt in his pockets, resuming his chat with Meg, and drew out the letter which he had received (when Mr. Forbes had done with it). He was putting it back into his pocket, when Mr. Forbes cried—

"That will do very nicely—the envelope, I mean. I'm much obliged to you, sir."

He was stretching across the table, thanking Lotha before the envelope was in his hand. It was in his hand a few seconds later, however, for Lotha simply took the letter out of its cover and returned it to his pocket, giving Mr. Forbes the empty envelope.

Mr. Forbes cut the edges and opened it out on the tablecloth, the address being underneath.

"I'm not sure that I've room enough for that extract from a pharmacopœia which you quoted to me, but I'll write fine, and mebbe I'll manage to squeeze it all in," said Forbes. "Now begin again: item, two chicken livers—must they be buff Orpingtons, or—or——?"

"Crimson ramblers," suggested Sir Drummond.

"More scoffing—heavens above!" cried Mr. Forbes. "I only want to be exact. If you assure me that there's no need for a choice of fowl, I'll just jot down the word fowl."

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"Be careful how you spell it," said Sir Drummond from the head of the table. "Man, stroke that u out. It's not spelt with a u."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Mr. Forbes. "But I've spelt it with a w. Now then; next item?"

Miss Isfield went through the whole list of ingredients, adding a few others, seeing that he had half-an-inch of the back of the envelope to spare.

Before this little bit of play between the two had come to an end, and certainly long before the jocular criticisms of Sir Drummond were exhausted, every one was ready to rise from the table, and Lady Athol was commenting upon some announcement in the *Morning Post*, that journal having just arrived.

Mr. Forbes folded up the envelope with an affectation of the greatest care, and put it in his waistcoat pocket. He found he had omitted to bring down his pipe, and disdaining the offer of a cigar made to him by Sir Drummond, went to his room.

When there he locked the door, and instead of hastening to find the pipe, he took out the envelope and brought it to a window, examining, not the note which he had made of Miss Isfield's promising little *hors-d'œuvre*, but the address in ink on the other side—

"Hubert Lotha, Esq.,

"At Craig Athol,

"Craigs, N.B."



"Ma certes!" he muttered. "Ma certes! if that isn't Job Bristow's writing, I'll—I'll—well, I'll get that prescription on the other side made up and eat it into the bargain."

He continued his examination of the writing.

"Don't tell me that there are two men in the world who write 'esq.' in that fashion, or who make such a g. Even the capital C has a twist of its own that I could swear to, and look at the B! the very B of his own signature. The rascal! The rascal! And in correspondence with that gentleman—that gentleman out there."

He could see Hubert Lotha smoking a cigarette and discussing with Sir Drummond the likelihood of the mist that had come swirling down the mountain and through the glen, turning to rain before noon.

Mr. Forbes watched the man.

"Is he a victim or an accomplice?" he said. "Job Bristow knew all about the Athol case, and he may have—oh, I didna think o' that. Job may have made his discovery of the heir and looks to receive the reward. Ay, ay. Mebbe that—mebbe that! But how about the man's coming on the scene? How about the abduction scene and the heroic rescue?"

He seated himself on one of the high-backed oak chairs and, with his eyes still upon the paper with its many creases, gave himself up to the working out of the new problem that had been suggested to him by seeing once again a handwriting with

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which he had at one time been very familiar—only too familiar.

After half-an-hour's consideration of the subject, he came to the conclusion that the time had come for him to be aggressive. He had been passive for several weeks, and although he knew that the passive attitude is usually the intellectual one, he made up his mind that the moment had come for him to abandon it. He was determined that he would make things hum.

But when another hour had passed the only thing that was humming was the telegraph wire on which a message of his was being carried to his managing clerk.

## CHAPTER XX

THE little telegraph office was located at Craigs village, about a mile from Craig Athol. It was rather out of the way for the Athols and their guests, so that it was but rarely a telegraphic form was filled up personally at the office. The dispatches were almost invariably sent in by a messenger. But Mr. Forbes would not trust this particular message of his to be carried by any one. He went to the village with it himself, and delivered it with his own hand to the telegraphist, the fully qualified daughter of Mrs. MacAlester, who supplied in her shop all the wants of the neighbourhood in the way of haberdashery, millinery, hardware, confectionery and groceries. The telegram was, of course, in cipher, and Mr. Forbes waited until the girl had read out every word that he had written.

He had hardly left the shop before he came face to face with Lotha, who was evidently bound on the same errand as had brought him to the village. Mr. Lotha was desirous of sending in person a telegram which was too important to be entrusted to a deputy.

"Hallo," said the lawyer. "Who would have thought to see you here at this time o' day?"

thought you had set out with the party for the brae."

"I found that I had some business to transact, so for once I responded to the call of duty," said Lotha. "Then I found I had a wire to send, and not being able to find the chap who carries them to the office I thought it would give me a breather to be my own messenger."

"He clearly finds it necessary to explain away his appearance here at this time," Mr. Forbes thought.

"Why?" was his next thought. "Why should he think it prudent to try to excuse himself for doing so simple a thing?"

To the suspecting all things are suspicious. No argument would have convinced Mr. Forbes that the man had made a very ordinary explanation of a very ordinary incident.

It was now Mr. Lotha's turn.

"And what may you be doing here, Mr. Forbes?" he asked.

The man was impertinent, Mr. Forbes thought. What business was it of Lotha's what he was doing. But he was civil in his reply and truthful in reply to an impertinent question: it suited him to be accurate upon this occasion.

"I had a wire to send to my managing clerk of so important a nature that I thought it well to deliver it with my own hands," he said.

"Just what I'll do with mine, only mine is of no particular importance," said Lotha, turning into the MacAlesters' shop and incidentally his

Majesty's Post Office. "If you are walking back I'll go with you," he added from within the doorway.

"Good," exclaimed Mr. Forbes, "I'll wait for you."

He would dearly have liked to read the telegram which the other would not entrust to the groom; but he could not quite see how he could contrive to do so. He suspected that it was addressed to the writer of that letter which he had received in the morning, and Mr. Forbes was rather anxious to know what was the address of Lotha's correspondent.

But what could he do but wait outside the shop until he should return? He could scarcely stand inside looking over his shoulder while he wrote his telegram. Mr. Lotha might go so far as to regard such an act as having the semblance of an impertinence.

But while he waited, Mr. Forbes was wondering how he could contrive to obtain at least a glimpse of the "addressee" on the form which Lotha entrusted to Miss MacAlester.

"That's done," said he briskly—boastfully, Mr. Forbes thought, when he came out of the shop. "That's done. I frankly confess that I hate business. I should have been born heir to an estate."

"Meaning that in such a condition you would have no business worries?" said Mr. Forbes.

"That's just what I mean. The worries might come, but I would pay some one else to be worried by them," laughed Lotha.

"I'm supposed to be Sir Drummond's agent for worry," said Forbes, "but I'm not sure that he hasn't an odd one now and again, to say nothing of that perpetual worry incidental to the peculiarity of his tenure of Craig Athol and his Scotch property. I don't suppose that Damocles lived a life of complete equanimity."

"Oh, that? But so far as Sir Drummond is concerned don't you think that he might rest certain that even if that man—what's his name?—Douglas Athol—were to turn up he would never have the cheek to turn him out?"

"You seem to have a sort of acquaintance with this missing heir, Mr. Lotha, you are so sure of what he would do and what he wouldn't do in certain circumstances."

Mr. Forbes turned his head quickly and looked into the man's face in a meaning way before he spoke, so that he could scarcely have been surprised to see his companion give a start.

"Didn't we have a word or two on this point a short time ago, Mr. Forbes?" he said in a low voice while he looked straight before him.

"We did exchange a word or two, Mr. Lotha, but we reached no definite point in our conversation. Now, don't you think that, between you and me, the time has come for something definite to be decided on?"

"Something definite?"

"Ay, sir; something definite. You said either much too much or much too little at the time you mention. I gave you a hint of what I had a vague

suspicion of and your reply was equally vague, but, at the same time, equally suggestive. Now, I have been giving all the attention possible to your words with a view to arrive at their exact significance, and the result is that I determined to ask you to say something definite to me, as the confidential man of business of the Athol family."

"I did not expect you to turn upon me with this demand so soon, Mr. Forbes. I knew all along, of course, that you were a shrewd man of business; but I thought that you would see the advisability of not forcing my hand. Nobody here except yourself suspects anything. They take it for granted that I have no more than an ordinary stranger's interest in the family."

"Ay, only better call it an extraordinary stranger's interest in the family of which the heiress is an attractive young lady. Isn't that so, Mr.—Mr. Lotha?"

"That is so, Mr. Forbes. I admit it—to you, but only to you, sir."

"What do you admit, sir? I must ask you to speak plainly—definitely. There can be no hints or uncertain suggestions from this point on."

"How much plainer do you wish me to be, sir?"

"Not much. Only, to begin with, will you entrust your real name to my keeping?"

"Every one who has called me Lotha has spoken my real name, Mr. Forbes, only with a change of the place of a few letters. Much though I wished to conceal my identity I could not bring myself to use any name to which I was not entitled. Even

at the risk of being prematurely discovered I refused to go outside the letters of my real name for a disguise."

"Lotha—Athol—is that it, sir?"

"That is it, Mr. Forbes. I am Douglas Athol, and you know it."

"I can't say that I hadn't my suspicions of you, sir, as you are well aware. I perceived that Lotha was an anagram to Athol before we had been acquainted many days. I don't deny either that I observed you pretty closely day by day, until—well, until I became pretty sure that we were bound to have this interview. Well, Mr.—Mr. Douglas, I'm sure that I should forfeit all your respect if I failed to confess to you frankly that, albeit I'm glad that all the doubts as to your existence which have been worrying Sir Drummond out of his life, are likely to be cleared up, yet I'm not so sure that I wouldn't rather that you had stayed away at least until he should be beyond the reach of such a trouble as now threatens him."

"Such a wish does you honour, sir. But, as I hinted to you a few days ago, I will not allow you or any one else to assume that my turning up in the way I did will bring any trouble upon the family of Athol. I tell you plainly now what I hinted at before, that sooner than announce myself and lay any claim to be the Laird of Craig Athol, turning Sir Drummond out of his house and home, I would take the first train south and return to my old life of wandering from land to land."

"And I repeat that that kindly feeling—that



generous feeling does you the greatest credit, sir. But having those sentiments, is it your intention to go back to—to where you came from without making your identity known?"

"Cannot you see that there is an alternative scheme, Mr. Forbes? Cannot you see that there is a way by which everything may come right?"

"You have seen that way? But what of the young lady, Mr. Douglas? Have you given Miss Meg a hint of what is in your mind?"

"What is in my heart, Mr. Forbes. My hope is that by the union of hearts rather than minds happiness may come to us all."

"Pardon an old lawyer's insistence, sir; but may I, without offence, ask if you think you have a chance with the young lady?"

The younger man frowned. Some moments had passed before he said—

"I have not thought it wise to give even a hint to her of what is my feeling toward her. Cannot you understand my reluctance to do so? Cannot you understand how great is my dread that gratitude—gratitude for an imaginary service done to her, rather than love, should impel her to give me a favourable answer? Sooner than allow her good nature to carry her away I wou'd turn my back upon her and this place, which I love so well, and bury myself once more in the forests which I have explored and sail back to the islands where I lived the life of a semi-savage. I sometimes wish to heavens that I had not been on the spot when she was in such danger—I do indeed, Mr. Forbes."

"Hush, hush! that is not the way to look at the mercy of Providence. If you had not been there—by the way, how did you ever come to be there, Mr. Douglas?"

"It is a simple story, my dear friend. I must confess that when by accident I heard of my father's death and how Sir Drummond had succeeded him at Craig Athol, I made up my mind to let things go on without interference on my part. I never wished to see the place again. But when I came to England I heard a good deal about my cousin—I saw her name in the society columns of some newspapers and—well, I suppose blood is thicker than water, but anyhow I was seized with a great longing to see her before I went away again. I learned that she was staying in Yorkshire with her aunt, and I went off to that neighbourhood hoping to have a chance of catching a glimpse of her. I was successful: I saw her one day on her horse—she had no eyes for me, of course—and that was enough for me; I fell in love with her at that moment. A second time I saw her—a third. It was when I was riding along the road, hoping with all my heart that I should have another chance of seeing her, that that adventure occurred which gave me the opportunity I rejoiced over at the time, since it placed me beside her; but now I tell you that I sometimes wish that some one else had earned her gratitude."

"You don't deserve your good luck if you look at it in that light; but wasn't there more in that

business of the abduction than meets the naked eye—eh, Mr. Douglas?"

The man whom the lawyer addressed glanced suspiciously behind him to make sure that no one was listening. Then, lowering his voice, he said—

"Your sagacity is not at fault, Mr. Forbes. The scheme was got up, as one of the fellows confessed to me, by that Italian Baron."

"Never! Why, he was on the Atlantic at the time."

The other smiled.

"True; that was the cleverest part of his trick. He went off like that so that it could never be fancied that he was connected with it. I made those rascals who were his accomplices confess everything to me; but, as you know, I saw in a moment that any attempt I might make to use the information I got from them would result in a scandal, perhaps even an international affair, for the fellow was, I believe, connected with the Embassy."

Mr. Forbes looked at him breathlessly for a few moments. Then he said—

"You acted wisely. Who can tell if your tact didn't avert a European war? It's from apparent trifling incidents like this that great wars usually spring."

"I would not call the carrying off of Miss Athol a trifling incident, Mr. Forbes."

"I ask your pardon, sir, and hers; it was a very grave incident—one that should involve penal

servitude to every one connected with it. That's worth remembering."

"I did not forget that. But think of the scandal of an open trial, Mr. Forbes, with photographs in the papers. And the comments! the gossip! there are always people who are ready to say that the girl in such cases is to blame. Oh, I saw it all in a moment. But I must confess that it went sorely against my grain to allow those curs to get off scot free."

"I can understand that. Well, to return to the situation of the moment, is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Only one thing I would ask of you, and that is silence. I believe that the next few days will settle everything. I believe that it is only my scruples—my absurd scruples, I dare say you will call them—that stand in my way; but I have made up my mind on that point: I do not want her to be actuated by gratitude. Until she has got rid of that consciousness of duty my lips must be sealed. So must yours, Mr. Forbes. If you were to speak now the consequences would be serious—perhaps irretrievable."

Mr. Forbes shook his head.

"You chivalrous gentlemen have no business in the twentieth century," he said. "We have no use for you. Thank Heaven there are not many of you, or we lawyers might close our offices. Well, well, have it your own way, have it your own way. I will not even give Sir Drummond a hint of the truth."

"I knew I could trust you," said the other in a low voice, for they had now reached their destination.

Miss Isfield was sitting with Meg in the great hall, and she smiled in a singular way—her own way—as they entered.

"A detestable girl!" said the younger of the two men as they stood together, hanging up their caps in the cloak-room. "A really detestable girl!"

"Ay," said Mr. Forbes, "a really clever young woman."

## CHAPTER XXI

MR. FORBES was energetic. After lunch he approached Meg and asked her if she felt inclined to be his companion in a stroll to Inchgarry, and he observed with some interest that she jumped at his suggestion. A flush had actually come to her cheek the moment he made it, and this fact he noted with increased interest. He was not a vain man; he never flattered himself that she had flushed with pleasure at the thought of being by his side for some hours.

But why, then, had she flushed?

Was it at the thought of being by the side of some one else for half-an-hour—for five minutes?

The question was an interesting one to this man of many questionings—this man who had found that every hour of the past few days had brought a new question for him to debate in his own mind in all its bearings.

He smiled down upon the girl, and when in the act of leaving the hall, he glanced at his fellow guest, who was discussing a box of cigars with their host. He could see that the man had heard his invitation to Meg and that he was not pleased

at the arrangement, or at the alacrity with which she had agreed to walk to Inchgarry.

Mr. Forbes had a feeling that the look on that man's face gave a satisfactory answer to the question that Meg's flush had suggested.

"Ha!" he muttered. "He decides that what she is thinking is that she will have five minutes with his rival."

He did not venture further in his investigations as to the origin of that little flush of hers. He knew that if men were to spend their time and thought in endeavouring to fathom the origin of young maidens' blushes and flushes they would reach the period of old age without having made any appreciable advance in the study of a phenomenon which, however charming it is to witness, is most disastrous to study.

Before he had walked for more than a mile by the side of the girl, however, he saw upon her cheeks a flush the origin of which he did not need to question. She was a good walker and so was he; the month was September, and the air was that which blows across a Scotch moor. The combination was enough to make even a Scotch lawyer blush, though that is not much in his line.

When they came in sight of Inchgarry Castle they caught a glimpse of some figures in the distance—a couple of men with guns and three women in short frocks and mountain caps of tweed. Salutations were exchanged, and the party nearest

the Castle waited for Meg and her companion to come up.

Mrs. Keith welcomed them and they walked on together, Meg being between that lady and one of her guests—Lady Janet Heyburn, a tall girl with magnificent sandy hair, suggestive, according to some scoffers, of a sunset at sea. But before the Castle was reached she was by the side of Rex, though whatever manœuvring had brought about this change of walking order Mr. Forbes had failed to detect it.

He wondered if any one detected his manœuvring to the same end when they had had tea, and the plans for the evening were being discussed. Perhaps he was clumsier in his action than Meg—not that it should be taken for granted that she had manœuvred—but at any rate he contrived to cut off the return of Mr. Castle from the billiard-room where the latter had gone for his tobacco.

"Do you mind returning to the billiard-room for a minute or two, Mr. Castle?" asked the lawyer. "I have been wanting another chat with you since that one we had on the terrace."

"Delighted, I'm sure," said Castle, "only won't the others——" He glanced toward the hall, where the noise of humorous discussion was going on.

"I don't think they'll mind; they can get on without us for five minutes," said Mr. Forbes, as they went through the passage to the billiard-room. "The fact is, that I paid a visit to an old friend of



mine, Andrew Macfee by name; mebbe you've come across him—a crofter that's gifted, if you can so term it, with second sight."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of the man."

"I thought that you'd mebbe heard of him. Well, I visited him and he told me that he had had a queer dream and awakened his wife by declaring that outside the door of his cottage there was standing a man whom he had not seen for sixteen or seventeen years—a man named Douglas Athol, the nephew of Sir Drummond."

"You seem to think that I take more interest than I really do in Highland traditions, Mr. Forbes. Why should you tell me this?"

"Only because when the man jumped out of his bed and hurried to the door to look out, he saw you walking away."

"I did not know that he had come to the door—I never saw him."

"Oh, then it really was you whom he saw?"

"I admit that I took a rather absurd walk very early one morning—I believe it was on Monday last week. It was a lovely sunrise, and I had awakened very early and could not go asleep again, though I tried hard to do so."

"You are given to taking long walks at queer hours, Mr. Castle."

"Not I—I don't know when I did anything of the sort before."

"I could give you the date, I do believe."

Mr. Castle looked at him with elevated eyebrows

for some moments. Then he said with an affectation of nonchalance—

"You are speaking as if you had a brief in your hand, Mr. Forbes."

"I'm only referring to my memory, sir. I'm only sorry that I missed you by about five minutes upon the first occasion of your visit to Craig Athol."

"Your memory is not so accurate as you seem to fancy it is, Mr. Forbes. You were present in the hall when Keith brought me across and I was introduced to you."

"I wasn't thinking about that occasion: there was nothing extraordinary about that visit. I was referring to the visit you paid to the library only some nights before when you entered the room by the window which had been, as usual, left unlatched."

"Oh, Mr. Forbes, this is too much! Do you know that you are actually accusing me of house-breaking? This is serious!"

"An action for slander might be brought against me if I repeated that charge in the presence of witnesses. Shall I give you a chance against me, Mr. Castle? There are half-a-dozen adults in the hall out there."

"Don't be absurd, Mr. Forbes. What should I do making a stealthy entrance to Craig Athol in the middle of the night when the house was open to me to enter in broad daylight?"

"I know what you did upon that occasion. You

entered and stood in front of a certain picture of a beautiful girl with a dog by her side, and you spoke to her such words as a son might speak to his mother."

Mr. Forbes spoke in a low voice, but slowly and deliberately, looking straight into the man's face. Before he had finished the other man had caught him by the arm, glancing behind him.

"Hush, for God's sake," he whispered. "I would not for any sum that they knew of it."

"Knew of what, sir?"

"Of that visit of mine—of—of—what you know."

"Why shouldn't they all know what I discovered for myself?"

"Mr. Forbes, do you mind telling me what you—*you* suspect?"

"No, sir; but if you wish I'll tell you what I *know*. I was very slack not to perceive the whole truth when the maid told me that story of your visit to the picture. I should not have needed to see you as I did with my own eyes a few days ago, facing that picture. But my attention was drawn in another direction. Does any one else know?"

"The Keiths know. I met Angus Keith in India a few years ago, and I confessed the truth to him. I told him that I had no intention of coming home to claim the property. That was the truth. It remains the truth to-day. I want to have nothing to do with the house where my dear mother suffered for so many years of her life. I hated Craig Athol

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and all connected with it. If I had returned and claimed it I would have set it on fire—that was the only aspiration that I had in regard to my mother's prison house—torture house."

"And the Keiths kept your secret well."

"It was of no importance to them. But when I came to England last May, and stayed with the Keiths in London, something happened that changed my outlook on life. I met my cousin Meg."

"And you had no longer a wish to see Craig Athol in flames? Well, sir, what followed? Mebbe that's your secret now. If so, it won't be me that'll seek to learn it."

"I shouldn't wonder if you had guessed it as you did the other, Mr. Forbes."

"Guess? guess! there was no guess work about the other. 'Twas my own shrewdness of observation that caused me to put one thing to another until the whole chain of evidence was complete. You forget that I am a solicitor and a Scotsman into the bargain."

"And the original Sherlock Holmes was, I understand, a Scotsman also. Never mind that. Being a Scotsman you will understand how it was I couldn't reveal myself."

"Is it a trait of our race, sir, to efface oneself where there's a fine property waiting for one? If so, all I can say is that I've never heard of it. However, I dare say I don't know the Scottish nation as well as you."

The other man laughed.

"We'll not enter into that delicate question, Mr. Forbes," he said. "All that I'll say to you is that I have some sense of fair play."

"That's interesting in the abstract, but what it has to do with the matter before us I can't quite see," said Mr. Forbes dryly, after a pause. "Do you suggest that you haven't had fair play?"

"I suggest that—that—well, I hardly know how to put it," replied the other. "What's on my mind is that—oh, hang it all, I'll be frank with you. Mr. Forbes, if it hadn't been that when I came north, I found at Craig Athol a man who had done a signal service to her—a man whose gallantry—there's no getting over it—placed the family under an obligation to him that gave him a claim—beyond dispute, a paramount claim—I think that I would have—at least I might have——"

"Have revealed yourself? Is that what you are trying to say?" asked Mr. Forbes.

"No, no—that would have come afterwards," cried the other. "No; what I was trying to say was that I would have spoken to Meg, telling her how I felt toward her."

"But because you found the other man with her you were ready to withdraw in his favour?"

"No; that would be to take credit for—for——"

"For a very foolish proceeding."

"Perhaps so; but I felt that the man who had done so much for her was at least entitled to some

consideration. But then I had no surety that even if I had spoken I should have been successful."

"Have you acquired these chivalrous notions from the Hindoos, sir? You certainly did not inherit them from your Scottish forbears, many of whom were sensible men, with a fair amount of self-respect, and not one of them bore the name of Quixote. You have done your best to make a muddle of everything, Mr.—Mr.—Castle; and if you find yourself compelled to go back to wherever you've been hiding all these years, you won't get my pity. You'll have only yourself to blame."

"I won't ask you for your compassion, my good friend. All that I'll ask you for is your silence. But I know that I can count on that."

"You needn't count on it. What I mean to do now is to go into the hall out there and tell Miss Drummond to ask of you if your name is Rex Castle or Douglas Athol and to wait for an answer."

"And, by the Lord Harry, if you do anything of the sort I'll go straight out of the other door and you'll never see me again. I swear to you that I'll do so, and you know that I'll keep my word. Talk of muddling! It's yourself that's trying to muddle up things just now when they were beginning to smooth themselves out."

Mr. Forbes smiled and then shook his head sadly. Before he could speak there came a hail from the end of the corridor. Mr. Keith wished

to know if Mr. Forbes was ready to walk back with Miss Athol or if he meant her to return alone.

The lawyer laid a hand upon the arm of the man beside him pretty much after the manner of a policeman making an arrest.

"I'll give you a week—one week and no more," he said. "If you haven't brought matters to a head by then I'll undertake the control of them myself. You understand?"

"I understand and I agree. Yes, a week will be enough. At the end of that time we'll make a new agreement."

They walked back together to the hall.

"We got into a bit of a discussion down yonder, that's what kept us," Mr. Forbes explained.

"A discussion? And what may the subject have been?" asked Mrs. Keith.

"It was a delicate question—whether Don Quixote or Rob Roy was the greater man," replied Mr. Forbes.

"A funny question," said Mrs. Keith; "and what conclusion did you come to?"

"Well, I think that when we were interrupted Rob Roy was the favourite, but I'm not so sure. Any how, the meeting stands adjourned for one week," said Mr. Forbes. "And now, Mistress Meg, I'm at your service."

The girl was not so agreeable a companion on the walk back to Craig Athol as she had been when going in the other direction, Mr. Forbes thought;

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and from this he judged that she did not feel so kindly toward him as she would have felt if he had not taken away Mr. Castle from her side.

He was quite pleased to think that she bore him a grudge for this.



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## CHAPTER XXII

MR. FORBES received a telegram first and a long letter afterwards from his confidential clerk in reply to the telegram in cipher which he had delivered with his own hand to Miss MacAlester for transmission to London.

He shook his head over the letter, and several times during breakfast he referred to that document, and became very thoughtful.

"I'm afraid that I'll have to go south to-morrow," he said at last.

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Sir Drummond. "You needn't tell me that any business calling for your personal attention crops up this month."

"This is imperative," said the lawyer.

"Oh, well, of course, you know your own business," said Sir Drummond.

"Not he, indeed," said Lady Drummond. "I know what Mr. Forbes is. He thinks that his presence is essential to the success of even the smallest detail of business, whereas a few telegrams would settle everything quite as well as he could do in person. Add your voice to ours in begging him not to yield to his egotistical impulses, Mr. Lotha," she added.

But Mr. Lotha did not immediately find words

with which he could obey her. He seemed rather pleased than otherwise at Mr. Forbes' announcement.

"I shouldn't like to say anything that might induce him to sacrifice some important business," were the words that came from him with evident reluctance.

"We'll only let him go now if he gives us a sacred promise to return immediately," said Meg.

"Oh, I'll give you that promise, whether it be sacred or profane," cried Mr. Forbes. "I promise you that I shall return."

He spoke his last sentence in so pointed a way that Sir Drummond glanced up from the newspaper which he was reading. But if he meant to inquire what Mr. Forbes meant he abandoned his purpose when he saw the activity with which the lawyer was making notes on the back of an envelope, preparatory to hastening from the room, which he did without a further word.

"More telegrams!" muttered Sir Drummond. "He has sent more telegrams since he arrived in these parts than we ever did during the whole autumn."

"Will he be writing in the library, do you think?" inquired Bertha Isfield.

"I suppose so; he usually has an hour there after breakfast," replied Lady Athol.

She jumped up from her place.

"And I left the writing-table covered with my correspondence; I must go and rescue it," she cried.

"Don't bother; it will be all right," said Meg.

But the clever young woman had already vanished. The patter of her feet across the floor of the hall was plainly heard in diminuendo.

She entered the library quickly, and found that Mr. Forbes had not yet sat down to the table. He was at a window reading once again the pages of the letter which he had just received.

"I hope you are not frightfully busy yet, Mr. Forbes," she said.

"Oh, no, no; not frightfully, my dear young lady," he replied. "I'm only thinking out something that needs a deal of thinking out, if it's not to be muddled."

"I made an excuse to come to you for five minutes," she said.

"I'm flattered," he remarked in a way that would have caused any one to feel that he had said "Be off with you!"

"You are a great lawyer, and I know that you are devoted to the interests of the Drummonds," said she slowly.

"And their friends," said he curtly.

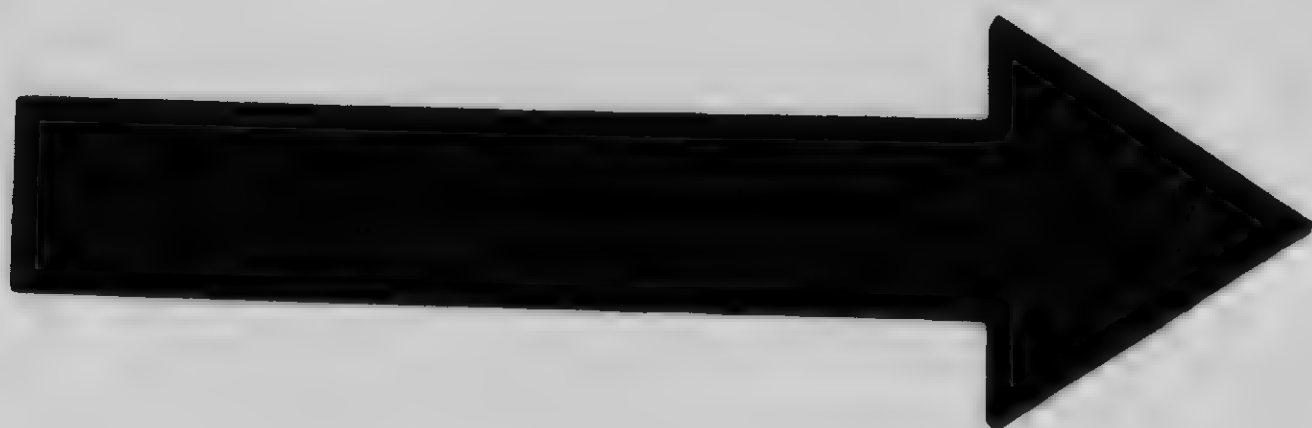
But the young lady would not be dismissed.

"Only you can help me out of my difficulty, Mr. Forbes," said she. "Do you know who this Mr. Hubert Lotha really is?"

"Has he been telling you who he is?"

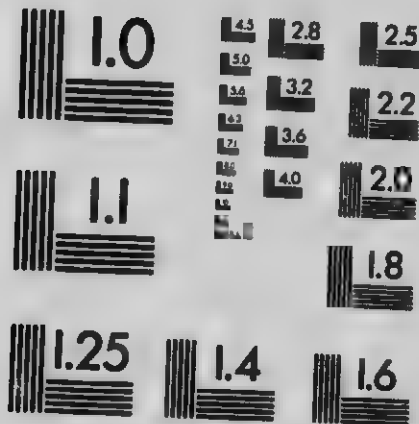
"Not he; I fancy he would be the last person in the world to do that. No, I found out for myself."

The man smiled.



# MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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"And who have you found out that he is?"

"He is Hugh Lovell."

Mr. Forbes raised his eyebrows. He had expected her to say quite another name. He laid down his letter, and pointed to a chair. Hitherto Miss Isfield had been standing, and he had certainly not encouraged her to sit down.

"And who is Hugh Lovell?" he asked.

"I thought that as you are a lawyer you would know all about him," she said.

"But, you see, I know nothing. Pray what do you know all about it?"

"My father was High Sheriff three years ago, and he did not object to my keeping him company when he went in to the Assizes at Lewes. I got enormously interested, of course, in every case that was tried—even the most trivial—foolish house-breaking cases and the like."

Mr. Forbes jumped up.

"At Lewes—three years ago last spring—of course!" he cried. "Hugh Lovell? That was the name of the man. I did not recall it at once. But I know the name of the other. Do you remember it?"

"The other man's name was Biblical—Job—Job—something—was it Bristol?"

"Ah, you have it—you have it; only it wasn't Bristol, but Bristow."

"Bristow. I remember it now. I knew it was something like that. Well, I was present at the trial of the two men for a really clever fraud—but you know all about it?"

"Everything. Bristow had at one time been a clerk in my office—an intelligent man—one of those intelligent men who are just not sufficiently intelligent to know that there's more money to be got by straight dealing than by crooked. Bless my soul! To think that I should forget for the moment that there was another man concerned in that last fraud of his! And to think that although I recognized Bristow's handwriting on the letter that I managed to get into my possession, I never connected that man at the other side of the hall with Bristow's affair! I ask your pardon, Miss Isfield. You say you recognized the man?"

"I was not quite sure before yesterday. The moment I saw him I had a suspicion that I had seen him before; but I could not remember when or where. I had a feeling that there was something objectionable about our former meeting—you know what I mean. A man tears your best frock at a dance, and when you see him again a year or two later you feel that you have met him before under unpleasant conditions, but you may not recall the exact incident. You understand?"

"Perfectly. You have made the thing wonderfully plain to me."

"I was racking my brain to try to recall something about him; but it was all to no purpose before yesterday. Then I saw him standing in the minstrels' gallery over the hall. You know it; it is just like the prisoners' dock in Lewes Court House. He stood in the gallery with his hands resting on the oak rail looking down at us. We were beneath

him, so that only his head and shoulders appeared above the rail—he stood there before my eyes, just as he had stood during his trial, and like a flash the whole scene returned to me. He is Hugh Lovell!”

“Mercy on us! ’Tis the hand of Providence. Beyond a doubt the hand of Providence is in this matter. Not but what I should have found out the whole thing for myself; for when I recognized John Bristow’s handwriting on the envelope of the letter addressed to him—you saw how I managed to get it from him in the morning? You helped me nobly in that, though you didn’t know it.”

“How clever of you! I thought you were really in earnest in taking down the ingredients of my *hors-d’œuvre*.”

“It will serve as an excellent appetizer for the dainty dish we are preparing for that gentleman. Bristow was with me for some years, and every now and again we were discovering some leakages in the confidential part of our office work, and at last we traced one to him, and turned him out. Afterwards I learned that he had been concerned in some fraud—an ingenious fraud, but nothing like so clever as the one for which he was put in the dock at Lewes.”

“It could not have been. You remember how he opened an account at a London branch, and then worked the fraud by the aid of one of the clerks—a man whose name was Hugh Lovell. I remember every word of the evidence. The whole story of the fraud reads like a chapter of a novel.”



"Ay, the last chapter. But I thought that they got five years apiece."

"Bristow got three, and the other got two."

"And yet the fellow had the effrontery to—but surely he disguised himself."

"He had no moustache when I saw him last, and his hair was lighter. It was a sort of brown, not the black that it is now. But the alteration was not enough to deceive me."

"There can hardly be a doubt about the man, but we'll make sure. We'll need to get a finger-print of his and send it for verification. Maircy on us! This last fraud of Bristow's is his masterpiece. Now I'll let you into a secret since you have been wise enough to confide in me. That man who calls himself Hubert Lotha told me only yesterday that he was none other than Douglas Athol."

"What, the missing heir? But why did he not tell this story to Sir Drummond—to Meg? Surely that would constitute even a stronger claim upon their gratitude than his pose as her heroic rescuer?"

"I have thought over that. He is keeping that part of his story back to the very last. Beyond a doubt the affair was started by Bristow. He knew all the details of the Craig Athol business when he was a clerk in my office, and he was aware of the fact that Douglas Athol had been advertised for in every direction without success. But he thought it better that his accomplice should make his appearance at Craig Athol as a hero in the first instance. He engineered the whole business of the abduction, and the timely arrival of the man with the revolver

to drive off the ruffians and restore the girl to the arms of her father. He had an eye for melodrama, that Job Bristow. Ay, and nothing of his scheme miscarried—nothing; for the grateful father assured me only a few days ago that if Meg chose to reward the fellow with her hand, he would not oppose the match. That's what the two men looked for; only when he had got the father's consent the lover meant to reveal himself as Douglas Athol—he actually said so to me two days ago. Then, of course, he would work his plans to marry the heiress before there was time for a thorough investigation of his story. His pose to me was that of a high-toned gentleman who would die rather than win the girl's love and her father's consent by confessing that he was the heir!"

Bertha Isfield held up her hands.

"Take my word for it, Mr. Forbes, that man will tell poor Meg that he is Douglas Athol in order to get her to accept him," said she.

"And will he prevail upon her, with Mr. Castle in the neighbourhood?" asked Mr. Forbes.

"He will. She knows that it would kill her father to leave Craig Athol, and she will be ready to sacrifice herself."

"We'll have a word to say before then. I believe I can lay my hand upon Job Bristow to-morrow. I wired instructions to my confidential clerk to communicate with the police, and if I get a telegram to-day I shall leave by the night train and have an interview with Bristow to-morrow in the presence of Superintendent Tracey of the Detective Force."

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## THE LAIRD OF CRAIG ATHOL 275

He had scarcely spoken before the door was knocked at. A servant entered with a telegram for Mr. Forbes.

He opened it and read the message.

"Job Bristow is known to be living at Rawdon in Yorkshire, six miles from the scene of the kidnapping of Meg," said he. "I shall be by his side to-morrow."

## CHAPTER XXIII

MR. FORBES left Craig Athol the next day, but he promised Lady Athol to return before the end of the week. It was a rather important piece of business he had to look after, but he did not think that it could possibly occupy him longer than a day or two. He took his departure on a day that was more typical of a Scotch mountain in autumn than any day of his visit had been. The rain was falling in torrents and the grey mist was whirling down the slopes and swirling through the glen.

But Mr. Forbes was indifferent to the weather. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the change.

"Ha, my lad, 'tis this sort of thing that has made us the race that we are to-day," was his response to the plaintive note in the remark made to him by the groom who drove him to the station.

"Ay, and indeet 'tis truth you say, Mr. Forbes; 'tis weather like her indeet that makes us owre keen at the pottle o' wheesky, sir," said the man in a tone of cordial acquiescence.

Of course the weather did not keep Sir Drummond indoors. He put on his cape and set out with his second best gun for a walk across the moor, hoping to pick up a grouse or two before lunch. Every one else, however, seemed to think it wiser to remain indoors.

And then it was that Mr. Lotha, on reminding Meg that they had not had a game of billiards together for a long time, found that the taking on of a game with Meg involved the taking on of Meg's friend, Miss Isfield, as marker. Miss Isfield seemed much more devoted to Meg to-day than she had ever been, for she never allowed the girl to be out of her sight for a moment. He had detested this clever young woman from the first, and her devotion to Meg did not cause him to change his opinion of her, which was that she was both suspicious and officious. It was no great consolation to him, who had felt the effects of the exercise of her officiousness, to reflect upon the possibility of her being actuated by a certain feminine jealousy. But her pertinacity in staying by Meg, allowing her to be for no moment alone in his company, forced him to believe that she was embittered through observing the excellent terms on which he remained with the girl.

He said several rather sarcastic things which he meant Miss Isfield to take to herself during this day; but he very quickly found that when a young woman has cultivated that horrid form of expression she can usually outmatch most men who attempt to employ it at her expense. Miss Isfield said a good many disagreeably clever things in the course of the forenoon; and, not content with getting the better of him in this respect, she must needs take it upon her to carry off Meg for a long walk in the afternoon, leaving him to keep Sir Drummond company until tea time; and he was getting tired

of Sir Drummond, who, he found, had little in common with himself and was apt to yawn and nod a good deal for some hours after returning from a walk over the mountain on a saturating forenoon.

On the whole he could not feel that the day had been so successful as he fancied it would be since that pawky old lawyer had gone away. But he had plenty of opportunity for thought when he found himself alone, and the result was to convince him that the time had come for him to do something definite. He had received a letter from a friend a few days before, urging upon him the adoption of this course; and he had replied over the wire in a way that he hoped would satisfy his correspondent, though he had not sufficient confidence in the reasonableness of that person to be quite certain on this point. But he felt that, beyond a doubt, the time was close at hand when he must make an advance movement; for the past week he had simply been marking time, and he knew it.

His hours of thought during this wet day had enabled him to perceive that he had a right to grumble at the want of continuity that marked his luck. At first he seemed to be able to do everything that he had set out to do; Fate seemed to be playing into his hands. He had made an impression upon the girl, and he felt that that impression had been increased by the frequency of the occasions on which he found himself alone with her among the romantic scenery of the Highlands, and

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by the green plateau of the billiard-table. But all too soon her mother had come upon the scene, and her mother took a very narrow-minded view of the liberty which a young woman should enjoy in her father's house. Then that pawky lawyer—he liked the word pawky, though he did not quite know what it meant—had taken upon him to ask many questions, so that he had been forced to show his hand prematurely, though he could not see from anything that had happened since, that the lawyer had given him or his secret away. Next he felt that he had reason to grumble at the ridiculous behaviour of that girl, who thought herself so clever. But irritating as all these people had been, he felt that none of them had been more than just irritating. The only person who was really dangerous was, he felt, Rex Castle.

He had noted the attitude of this man in regard to Meg, and, what was more alarming still, Meg's attitude in regard to him, particularly upon the last occasion he had seen them together; and it was his earnest consideration of this matter that caused him to think that his first move forward should be made in respect of Rex Castle. He resolved to adopt a definite course of action upon the first opportunity that might come to him.

He had not long to wait. The next day there was a shoot over a distant moor, with the Inchgarry party, and on the way home he found himself, as he intended he should, by the side of Rex Castle, a long way behind the rest of the party; and it seemed as if Rex Castle had deter-

mined to play into his hands, for when they had climbed by a track that led over a part of the mountain from which the distant turrets of Craig Athol were visible, he remarked, after calling his attention to this fact—

"By the way, Mr. Lotha, I hope you will not think it an impertinence on my part to offer you my congratulations upon having it in your power to do all that you did for Miss Athol. She told me the story of your bravery. I don't think that I ever heard of a braver act. Those fellows who had seized her must have been desperate ruffians and you must have known it."

"I must have known it? How could I have known it?" cried Lotha quickly.

"Of course you must have known it," replied Rex. "What men but the most abject scoundrels would have attempted such a crime? And yet you did not hesitate to face them all, though you were practically without a weapon."

"Oh, that was nothing worth talking about; any man who was a man would have done all that I did. I take no credit for it. There was nothing extraordinary in anything that I did; the extraordinary part of the story has yet to be told. There is no one who can tell this part but myself. Mr. Castle, you are, I feel, a good fellow, I know that my secret is safe with you. The fact is that I am here under a false name. For reasons of my own I thought it well to keep back my real name from Miss Athol, in the first instance, and from her family later on."



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"You must have had good reasons for doing so,  
Mr.—Mr.——"

"Athol—call me Athol, my dear Castle. I con-  
fess to you what I have not done to a living soul—  
I am Douglas Athol, the rightful Laird of Craig  
Athol."

## CHAPTER XXIV

To say that Rex Castle was overcome with surprise at the revelation of the identity of the man who had called himself Hubert Lotha is not to exaggerate the effect which the story had upon him. He took a step back, and stared with wondering eyes at the man before him. It seemed that he was trying to speak but failing to find words. He could only stare at the other as though he were a strange being the like of whom he had never seen before.

"I don't wonder that you are astonished," said the man who was the object of his scrutiny, smiling. "You can understand what my feelings were when Miss Athol—my cousin Meg—told me who it was that I had rescued. Castle, I give you my word that I thought I should have dropped on the road when she spoke the name. Talk of coincidences! But every one has had some experience of what is called coincidence. We think of a man whom we have neither seen nor heard of for years, then we turn a corner and come face to face with him. Yes, but this particular one—well, you can understand how it staggered me. It took me some time to reply to her when she asked me what my name was. It went to my heart to deceive her, but

I thought I was compromising the matter when I gave her the anagram upon Athol—rearrange the letters and you have Lotha. You see?"

"Yes, I see—I see," said Rex. His voice did not sound like his own. He had not yet recovered from his surprise. "Then, if you are Douglas Athol you are staying as a guest under your own roof. You can turn out Sir Drummond at a moment's notice."

"What do you take me for, Mr. Castle?" cried the other indignantly. "Do you really fancy that I am the man to behave in that way towards my cousin and his family? Let me assure you that I am not that sort of man. What do I care about Craig Athol and the estate that goes with it? I tell you this, that sooner than take any steps to assert my rights I would pack up my portmanteau and leave Scotland never to see it again, much though I love the old place. I have led a wandering and adventurous life since I left my home as a boy, and I can go back to that life without a sigh, if by doing so I shall feel that I have not disturbed the happiness of a man whom I respect and love and a girl whom—Castle, I have trusted you with one of my secrets, can I trust you with another?"

Rex smiled and then became grave.

"You mean that you—you——"

"You have guessed it—I see that you have guessed it. I never dreamt that it could be; but it has come to pass. Yes, I love my cousin, Meg Athol. Now you see how the hand of Providence was in this matter from the first. You can see how

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everything is coming right—right for Sir Drummond and right for the heir."

"Of course—yes—yes—I see what your meaning is."

"I knew I could trust you, my dear Castle—I knew it the first moment that I spoke to you. There are not many men whom I would trust in a matter of this sort. If I were to begin to talk to them of how I feel they would simply put the tongue in their cheek and go on to call me a sentimental fool to the first person they met. I may be a sentimental fool, Castle—I don't deny it, but even at the risk of being called one, I refuse to be a party to such an act of injustice as turning my kinsman out of the place that he believes to be his own. It would be an act of injustice, you know."

"It certainly would. But do you think that your plan for allowing him to remain will be successful?"

"You mean do I think that Meg——"

"If you don't mind we will call her Miss Athol."

"My cousin Meg?"

"Miss Athol."

"Well, Miss Athol, if you insist. Well, you see it's this way, Castle. I have good reason to think that she is not indifferent to me. But what I'm afraid of is that she may have some sense of gratitude to me for what I did for her—girls are inclined to exaggerate these services, you know—and she may feel bound to respond simply on this account. Now if I thought that gratitude played any part in respect of her feeling for me, I would

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go straight back to my old life rather than take advantage of such an ally as her gratitude. I give you my word that I sometimes wish with all my heart that I had not been compelled by the force of circumstances to earn her gratitude."

"That's very noble of you, Mr.—shall I say Athol?"

"For Heaven's sake no; not yet—it might slip from you unconsciously. Call me Lotha, it's all the same, you know."

"I suppose it is. The one is as much your name as the other."

"What do you mean? Oh, I see; yes, the one is as much my name as the other—both are made up of the same letters."

"What I should like to ask you is—Do you not fancy that Miss Athol may have some feeling of tenderness in regard to the Barone del Greppo?"

"Oh, I have put a spoke in his wheel—that is, I should say, she knows that it was he who organized that plot for carrying her away."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Why should I not believe it? The whole business smacked of the plot of an Italian brigand."

"Do you mean to say that, with your experience of the world, you believe that an Italian nobleman belonging to a great Roman family would act the part of a vulgar mountebank?"

Mr. Lotha smiled the smile of a superior person.

"Take my word for it, Castle, that just as you scratch a Russian and find a Tartar, so if you scratch an Italian you'll find him a brigand. I

have had a good deal wider experience than you old man, and I have met enough Italians to convince me of the truth of what I am talking about. Let that be. Now don't you think that we should hurry on to the rest of the party? Remember that what I have told you is in strict confidence. I have told you more than I have ever told a soul."

"Just one word," said Castle. "There have been claimants in the past to the property of Craig Athol; you will be able when the time comes to establish your identity?"

"Make your mind easy on that point," said the other, smiling again. "Have I not told you that I have no wish to claim anything except—except—the hand of the girl who is worth more than all the estates in the Highlands."

"And you have no intention of confessing or suggesting to her that you are the heir?" said Castle.

"Castle, I swear to you that, rather than try to gain a single point by such means I would clear off from here and bury myself once more in the bush. No, I shall win off my own bat or not at all."

Rex Castle did not speak another word.

Two days later Rex Castle was fortunate enough to come upon Meg Athol at the foot of the little glen, leading up to the moor, not half-a-mile from Craig Athol. It was one of those accidental meetings which had been arranged for by letter.

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Mr. Castle," she said; "but as you said that the matter was important, I made up my mind that you should not be disappointed."

"I was hoping that I might prevail on you to meet me alone, though I admit that it was rather presumptuous on my part to make that stipulation."

"I am not sure that it was any presumption," said she. "But you will be surprised to hear that just before I got your note I was thinking of writing to you to meet me alone. Wasn't that rather odd?"

"Very odd. Let us walk up the glen," he said; and they began to stroll along the little track to the broad moorland path. "I cannot imagine why you should wish to meet me alone. But I hope that you will not profess a similar want of knowledge as to my motives."

"I don't quite understand you," said she, with a slightly puzzled expression on her face. "I was wanting to have a talk with you—to ask you a few things."

"And I wanted to ask you only one thing, and that is, if you think you can ever care for me a little," he said quietly.

She stopped dead on the little path; from a crevice in the rock just above her a rowan tree was in full bloom. Its warm colour contrasted with her face, which had now become very white.

"Come, Meg, answer me—surely you can give me some sort of answer?" he cried. "Any sort of answer would be better than this suspense."

Not two minutes had passed since he had put

his point-blank question to her; and yet now was talking about suspense.

But she did not even smile at his foolishness.

"If you had asked me a week ago—ten days ago, I think that I might have given you an answer—the answer that you would like me to give you, and the answer that I should like to give you," she said.

"If you could have done so then you can certainly do so now, Meg," he said.

"You are wrong—something has happened in the mean time—something that no one could have foreseen."

"You do not mean to tell me that that man—that your sense of gratitude——"

"Even if there was nothing else, surely that sense of gratitude should be enough to cause me to——"

"To respond to his protestations of love?"

"Think of all that I owe him, Mr. Castle; think of what he did for me. Where should I have been now if he had not come upon the scene?"

"That is more than I can tell you. And you think that the best you can do now is to marry the man who rescued you from—from whatever he did rescue you from? Well, that would be the traditional end of the adventure, I admit. And your answer to me now is that although you had some affection for me a fortnight ago, yet now you have thought it only just and reasonable—leaving generosity out of the question altogether—to transfer that affection to the man to whom you owe your rescue?"



"How can you talk in that horrid way? You know nothing of the matter. How can you fancy that—that I—oh, Rex, I almost hate him now! At first—for the first day after he had done me that service I had a feeling that my gratitude might carry me to any distance with him—even to promising to marry him; but the moment you appeared again, I knew that it was impossible."

"My dearest!"

"No, no, do not touch my hand. Something has happened since—no later than yesterday—that makes it impossible for me to marry any one but him. If I, knowing what I do now, were to marry some one else, I should be the most ungenerous—the most undutiful of daughters."

"Of daughters? Where does any question of daughterhood come in in this connection? You may show yourself to be ungrateful as a—a—shall we say, as a heroine of romance?—but that is something quite different from being an ungrateful daughter."

"Oh, you do not understand."

"I certainly do not understand. Listen to me, Meg, when I tell you again that you have all the love of my heart, and ask you if you have any love in yours for me. Meg, do you love me? Answer me at once."

"I do—I do—God knows that I do—but that is just where the bitterness of my fate appears; I love you, Rex, and yet I can never be more to you than I am now. I must marry—some one else."

"Dearest, you have said the sweetest words that I have heard spoken."

"No, no, they are the bitterest words that you ever heard, if you love me at all."

"They are the sweetest to me because I have no thought—no hope that is not tinged with my love for you. Meg, you are mine—mine, and no one else's."

He caught her to him, and held her in his arms. She found herself incapable of resisting him. She allowed him to hold her head back while he kissed her—a score of times—a hundred times—on the mouth, the cheeks, the forehead. Not until she was as breathless as he did she even have a thought of freeing herself. She made two or three attempts before she succeeded.

"You should not have done that," she cried. "It was ungenerous of you at this moment when I have just told you that it is impossible for you to be anything to me. Now, we must part, and if you have any regard for me you will pray, as I do with all my heart, that we may never cross each other's path again. Good-bye, Mr. Castle."

He laughed strangely.

"I promise you one thing, Meg," he said, "and that is that you shall marry me and no one else—'not Lancelot nor another'—may we call the other Lancelot for one occasion only—the last time you and I will talk of him seriously?"

"What do you mean?—oh, do not smile in that way, Rex; you do not know what has come to my knowledge," she said.

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"Do I not? Perhaps if you tell me what it is you may find that I have at least a smattering of the subject."

"I will tell you and then we shall part, for I know that if you love me you will have the courage to leave me. If you love me your love will prevent you from standing between me and my duty."

"You love me, darling Meg. I know it, it is your love that endows me with an heroic quality, but there will be no need for me to exercise such a quality at this time. Do you know, dearest, I am almost sick of the very name of hero. We have had a great deal of the spurious form of heroism, and, really, one is apt, after a time, to think that there is no hero except the one whose heroism is unknown to any one except himself."

"You are not talking generously now. Would you seek to deprive the man who rescued me——"

"What man is he? What is his real name?"

"His real name? That is the secret which has just been revealed. Rex, I wonder if you have ever heard the story of how my father came to inherit Craig Athol and the estate?"

"Of course I heard all about it. There was a son of the late owner, but he was long ago proved to be dead."

"That is just the mistake that was made. Douglas Athol was never proved to have died. For years nothing was heard of him, but my poor father had a presentiment that he would return some day to claim his own. Rex, he has returned and he has claimed—me."

"You mean that he—he—the heir——"

"I mean that by an extraordinary coincidence the man who befriended me when I was in the hands of my enemies is none other than Douglas Athol, the Laird of Craig Athol."

"Good heavens! Who could have imagined that?"

"I told you how amazing was the character of the revelation. Now you know how it is that I cannot marry you—that I must marry him."

"I see—I see. My poor Meg! And you would actually go so far as to marry this man whom you do not love for the sake of retaining the estate?"

"Not for myself—not for myself—only for my father. I know that if my father were to be disappointed now he would never recover from the shock. You could have no idea what Craig Athol is to him."

"And you believe that your duty as a daughter should lead you to sacrifice yourself in order that the property may remain in your father's possession? But would your father retain it if the heir were to reveal himself?"

"It would not matter to him then—he would know that in any event it would be mine. I am his only child. Now, you see how I am situated. You see how impossible it is for me to escape from this responsibility."

"Meg, you are sure that this man is Douglas Athol?"

"Can there be any doubt about it? His name is Lotha—that spells Athol, with the letters arranged

a little differently. Oh, I am afraid there can be no doubt about it."

"And do you consider that he acted generously in regard to you, to tell you his secret, and then ask you to marry him?"

Meg did not answer him at once, she bent her head, and when she began to speak it was in a low voice.

"It is no matter whether in our opinion he acted generously or the opposite; but indeed I think that he meant to be generous even when—when——"

"When—when he told you that you must marry him?"

"I mean when he entreated me to run away with him and have a secret marriage."

"What! the scoundrel! The infernal scoundrel!"

"Hush—hush. He gave me his reasons, and I do not think that you would say that they were ungenerous. He said that he knew if he were to reveal himself to my father, my father's pride would be too great to allow of his remaining a single day at Craig Athol—he would leave the place to the new heir, and hate him ever after for dispossessing him. He is anxious that I should marry him so as to induce my father to listen to reason."

Rex Castle gave a laugh. During their conversation they had walked through the glen, and were now on the track leading to Macfee's moorland croft. Some rain was beginning to fall. They instinctively quickened their steps.

"What answer do you intend to make to this

plausible scoundrel?" asked Rex, after a long silence.

"I cannot bear to hear you allude to him in that way," said she. "Surely you should be chivalrous enough to do justice even to a man who may be your rival."

"My rival? He is no rival of mine. You love me, my Meg, and you despise him as heartily as I do. You are going to marry me and not him. O that I can assure you, whatever else may be doubtful—including the identity of this enterprising gentleman, who hoped to play the part of a hero in your eyes."

"Mr. Castle, I cannot listen to anything more," she cried.

"Then I shall say nothing more just now. Let me put myself out of the way of temptation by taking shelter in that farmhouse. I do not wish you to get wet, even though you will not look at matters from my standpoint."

Meg hurried through the blinding rain along the path to Macfee's farm. It was a terrific shower, and when they arrived at the cottage they found not merely the lower half of the door shut, but the upper part as well, to keep out the deluge.

Rex knocked with the handle of his stick. At first there was no response; but at the second knock the upper half of the door was pulled open by Mrs. Macfee, and a voice was heard coming from the kitchen, and it said—

"Come ben and welcome, Maister Douglas—come ben the hoose, oot o' the rain. I kenned weel that

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it was you yoursel', Maister Douglas, though ye  
hae na darkened my dure for nigh seventeen year."

"Ay, I'll gang ben, Andrew my lad," said Rex  
cheerily, and he followed Meg through the door.

She turned upon him.

"Who are you?" she cried.

"Macfee will tell you. He has the gift of second  
sight. He will tell you that I am Douglas Athol,  
returned to claim his own—his own dear love, Meg,  
and nothing else."

## CHAPTER XXV

MEG was rendered speechless by the revelation made to her by her lover. Her brain was in a whirl. She looked first at the man who had just spoken and then at Macfee. Happily the latter retained his power of speech. His doing so gave her a chance of recovering.

"They all said that you were deid, Maister Douglas, but I kenned weel that you were no deid my bonnie lad," he cried. "Many's the time I ha seen ye with my ain een—among the black niggers ye were, and gin I speer at ye the noo, 'tis nigh as swart as a black ye be yersel', Maister Douglas. Ay, nane o' them would believe me but only Sir Drummond. Maister Forbes didna half believe a' that I said aboot you and the blacks."

"When I wanted to hide myself so that my father should not find me, I thought of you, Andrew," said the other. "Your second sight made me feel uneasy; but then I reflected that my father would never apply to you to help him in his search for me, if he ever would think of searching for me."

"The auld maun was ower proud to gie awa' his thochts, Maister Douglas," said Andrew. "But



them that served him hae told me often that he would be heard tramping up and doon the bare fluirs lang past mid-nicht—ay, and that for manys the lang year. It was you that was in a' his thochts, Maister Douglas—dinna doot that, my lad, whatever ithers may say. He was cruel bad to ye when ye were nigh till him, Maister Douglas, but gin ye went awa' he war ne'er the same body. The heart had fair gone oot o' him, and gin I seen him a year after it didna need a second sight to tell me that the mark o' death was on him."

"Perhaps I was too hasty in leaving him, Andrew; I have often thought since that I should have borne with him longer."

"He was mair nor flesh and blood could stan', and that's the truth, Maister Douglas. Oh, ay, the Laird was a hard maun in a' his dealings."

Meg cast an imploring glance at her lover. He understood what she meant by it. He whispered a few words in the ear of the crofter and the latter nodded, and taking his wife by the arm, led her into the inner room of the cottage, leaving Meg and her lover together.

"Meg, Meg, say that you believe me," he cried, taking her hand.

"It is all so strange—so wonderful!" she said. "I cannot realize it yet. You must remember that only a couple of hours ago I was hearing another man confessing that he was Douglas Athol."

"The rascal told me the same story two days ago."

"But why should he tell you—you of people?"

"I saw at once what was in his mind: he had come to perceive that you and I were on excellent terms, my Meg, and he thought that he would make an appeal to my generosity to remove myself out of his way, so that he might have every chance with you. He said to himself: 'Here is a fellow who may stand in my way, so I would do well to make an appeal to his generosity. If he cares at all for Meg'—he actually alluded to you and Meg, until I stopped him—'if he cares at all for her he will be too generous to refuse to lend himself to a scheme which will prevent her father from being turned out of Craig Athol.' That was how he reasoned with himself, the rascal! and thus he made up his mind to put my generosity to the test. At the same time he gave me his word that he would tell you nothing about himself."

"He told me his story last evening," she said.

"Oh, Rex——"

"You had better call me Douglas at once; you will be the first to do so for a good many years."

"Are you really Douglas—really—really? It seems like a dream—the story of a dream."

"I assure you that you are not making a mistake this time, my dearest."

"But the—the—the other?"

"He is an impudent impostor, Meg."

"He may be an impostor so far as his claim to the property is concerned, but you must not forget that he acted courageously on my behalf upon one occasion."

"Did he? I have been thinking over that business, and so has Mr. Keith, and we came to the conclusion that the whole affair was but another piece of his imposture. The fact that he pretended to you that the men had told him that the Barone was their employer made me suspect him from the first."

"Is it possible? But how could he have obtained his information about the missing heir?"

"Why, my dear girl, the newspapers were full of Mr. Forbes' advertisements a few years ago. I read several of them myself. This fellow may either have seen the advertisement or been put in possession of the facts by some of the newspapers that chronicle the doings of society and do their best to introduce a spice of gossip in connection with every well-known name. Have you never read any paragraph in which after mentioning your name in connection with some function, the story of how Craig Athol came into your father's possession was told?"

"I have seen several such paragraphs. And you fancy that he——"

"He may have seen one of these also, and being of an adventurous turn resolved to introduce himself to you in such a way as he thought would appeal to a girl."

"I cannot believe it. Such a plot would be difficult to carry out without detection. But no mind him; oh, Rex—Douglas, I mean, I am happy. Do tell me all about yourself."

"All—all? My darling, that is rather a large order. How am I to compress the incidents of sixteen years into a narrow enough compass for you to hear all between the showers—not a very long space of time in our dear Highlands."

"Tell me where you have been. Were you really at Darjeeling, and have you really made a fortune? There are so many unreal things about me I feel ready to doubt everything I hear."

"I can assure you of one real thing, Meg, and that is my love for you. My darling, when I set out for England scarcely a year ago, it was on the suggestion of Angus Keith. He had recognized me several years before when we met in India, but I begged of him to keep my secret, and he promised to do so. He saw what a good thing it would be if you and I were brought together, but he was wise enough to say nothing to me at the time, knowing very well that the sure way to prevent a man from falling in love with a girl is to tell him what a good thing it would be for both of them."

"He was wise—he was canny, Douglas."

"That's our word—canny—he was canny, and we were brought together. The result being——"

"That we are together—there's no need to emphasize it, Douglas; we need not be quite so

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"Well, we are together, Meg, and we mean to remain together, do we not, dearest?"

"Go on with your story, Douglas."

"There's nothing to go on with. I fell in love with you, but I made up my mind that I would not reveal who I was until I had heard from your own lips that you loved me. I knew that to do so would be to take an unfair advantage of you; for I knew that you would do almost anything to save your father from having to part with his beloved Craig Athol."

"And you kept to your resolution. That is the difference between you and—and——"

"Don't think of the rascal. I shall have something to say to him a little later on. I kept to my resolution; but I ran a pretty good chance of being found out the day after I arrived at Inchgarry. I did a very foolish thing. I left Inchgarry after midnight and walked across the mountain to Craig Athol. I wanted to see the old place by myself, and I did so. By accident I found one of the French windows of the library open and I could not resist the temptation to enter the room and stand once more in front of the picture of my mother. I had an electric lantern with me, but I suppose I must have made some noise before I switched on the light, for I could not have been standing before the picture for longer than a few minutes when I heard a step. I glanced round and

saw that one of the servants had entered the room. She screamed out loudly enough to arouse the whole house, and I switched off my light and fled."

Meg laughed heartily.

"So this is the origin of the story that poor Mary told of the figure with the black face which so alarmed her!" she said.

"I assure you, dearest, I did not wait to see what happened, I made a rush for the glen and did not pause until I was at Inchgarry. If I had been captured that night, I am afraid that my plan would have been spoilt. I should have been compelled to bring forward the plea that I had a right to burgle my own house or else gone to gaol for housebreaking. It was a great risk to run, but I could not resist the temptation of looking once more at the face of my dear mother."

"I can understand how great was the temptation. And now that I come to think of it, Mary Allen was the parlour-maid who let the coal-box fall at the moment of your entering the hall a few days ago. It is perfectly plain that she recognized you. If we had had any clever people among us you might have been arrested within an hour. And that is all your story?"

"That is all my story. Only I should have mentioned at the outset that when I left home it was on the invitation of the man to whom my mother had been engaged before my father came upon the scene. His name was Ernest Hammerton. He

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sent me money for my expenses going out to him in India, and with him I lived all these years. He had never forgotten my mother, and he died faithful to her memory. More than once after my father's death he urged me to go home and take possession of Craig Athol, but I made up my mind never to do so. I had come to hate the place, associated as it was with the ill-treatment to which I was subjected in my early years—yes, and with the martyrdom of the one who was so dear to me, my beloved mother. That is all my story."

Meg gave him her hand.

"Dearest, the fault will not be mine if your days at Craig Athol do not become the happiest of your life," she said.

He had his arm about her, but before he could put his face down to hers, the door was pushed in, and a half-drowned wretch entered the room. He looked as if he had been dragged through a river; the rain was running off his garments in rivulets.

"Lord! if this is your picturesque 'ighlands I'll arrange to keep to the ordinary lowlands," he muttered, taking off his hat and allowing the rain to stream from it. "I never did see anything like that rain, it couldn't ha' been worse at the time of Noah's Ark. If I had known that Craig Athol was miles from a station I would have stayed at home. Am I on the right track to Craig Athol, sir?"

The stranger had asked his question without

looking up from his streaming hat, but when he had spoken he glanced at Douglas Athol. At that moment that his face was revealed, Meg cried out. The next moment the man made a rush for the door. He did not reach it. Douglas's hand was on his limp collar, and he twisted the man back into the room.

"Stand there, you rascal, if you do not want to make you incapable of standing anywhere," said Douglas. "You are one of the fellows who played a nice trick upon this lady three weeks ago."

"How did you guess?" cried Meg. "Yes, he is the one who overtook me on horseback."

"Andrew," shouted Douglas, and in a second Macfee had come out of the other room. "Andrew, stand by and be a witness to all that this man says. Now, my good fellow, you have never been to the Highlands before. You maybe never heard of Highland justice. Never mind, you'll soon know about it. This lady is the daughter of a Highland chief, and the rule is that the man who lifts his hand against any of the women folk of a Highland chief has both hands cut off. Andrew, bring forth the hatchet of the clan."

The wretched man gave forth a howl, and fell on his knees before Meg.

"Spare me—for Gawd's sake beg him to spare me," he shrieked. "I'll confess all—I'll swear to the truth of it all."

"Let us hear you," said Douglas, "and if we find that you have spoken the truth you shall have



a chance of your life. But if you make the least slip——"

"I'll speak the truth—every word—every word, sir," said the man. "The whole affair of the capture of the lady was a trick. A man who calls himself Job Bristow was at the bottom of it. He had just come out of quod for a fraud on a bank. He and the other chap were pals, and they got up the kidnapping between them. I was a fool to be fooled into joining in with them. But we were to get twenty pounds a-piece for the job, twenty pounds to be paid the next day; but nigh a month is gone and not a penny we have got from either of the gentlemen for doing their dirty work. I tracked one of them here, getting the name of the house, Craig Athol, from the servants at Belfield Manor."

"And the plan was that you were to carry off the lady, wait at a certain lonely part of the moor until he rode up and went through a sham of rescuing her?" said Douglas.

"That was it, sir; I'll swear to it," replied the man. "The gentleman is a bad lot if ever there was one, though he was a bank clerk in his day, and he's said to belong to a first-rate family in England, but I doubt it. I only wish that I was face to face with him now."

He had scarcely spoken before the door was opened, and in there stepped the man who had called himself Lotha. He, too, was drenched.

"What, you here, Meg? This is luck," he cried.

"Yes," said Douglas, "this is luck."

"Yes," said the man who had expressed the wish to be brought face to face with Lotha, "this is luck."

He grinned very impudently in the new-comer's face.

Douglas Athol saw Lotha's hand move in the direction of his hip-pocket, and leapt upon him even before he had time to draw his revolver, but not before his hand was upon the stock.

"You ruffian!" he said through his clenched teeth. "You mountebank! I'll teach you a lesson that will last you to the end of your days."

He hurled him toward the door, only removing his hand from the fellow's neck in order to catch up one of the crofter's cow-hide whips which lay across a chair.

"Douglas! Douglas!" shrieked Meg, but Douglas paid no attention to her. He was giving all his attention to the wriggling wretch whose revolver was lying on the floor. Out they went with a rush, Macfee following them and closing the door tightly behind him.

Meg shouted, and beat upon the door, but only for a short time. Then she laughed, and seating herself upon a chair burst into tears. It took Mrs. Macfee quite five minutes soothing her.

At the end of that time, Douglas, looking very hot and untidy, re-entered the cottage, followed by Macfee, with a very broad smile on his face.

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Douglas flung down the tattered remains of the whip, saying—

"Andrew Macfee, you should be ashamed of yourself for owning such a wretched whip!"

"Maybe that, Laird," said Macfee, "but it sairved its turn, and it's one-and-eight that you owe me for spoilin' it, Laird."

"Don't call me Laird," said Douglas. "There's only one Laird of Craig Athol, and his name is Sir Drummond Athol."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the library at Craig Athol Sir Drummond was sitting, a hand clutching each arm of his chair, while he listened to the story which Mr. Forbes, still wearing his travelling cloak, for he had just been driven from the railway station, had to tell him—a strange story, involving a reference every now and again to a document signed "Job Bristow" which he held in his hand, and to a letter signed "Douglas Athol."

When the long tale came to an end, Sir Drummond could only stare at the narrator. He had not uttered a word when Meg and Douglas appeared outside the window.

"Father," said Meg. "Do you know who this man is?"

"Heavens!" cried Sir Drummond, starting up. "Why did we not see the likeness between him and that picture—his mother? Yes, Meg," he faltered, "he is the Laird of Craig Athol."

"You never were further mistaken in your life,"

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she said. "He is the man whom I have promised to marry, and I have made a vow that I shall never marry the Laird of Craig Athol. What are we to do?"

"Stand there while I give you my blessing, my daughter and my son," said the Laird of Craig Athol.

"Not here, sir," said Douglas. "Not here, but in the room—in the presence of one witness."

He looked up at the picture of his mother. The knelt before it.

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